

Improving performance in interaction tasks by implementing effective feedback strategies and task repetition

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Abstract

The present work attempts to describe the role feedback plays in the improvement of speaking in interaction tasks; specifically, in the FCE speaking task part 3. In order to do this, an action research was carried out with a group of 8 students, who were divided in 4 pairs. 2 pairs received delayed feedback and 2 pairs received immediate feedback. The students repeated the task 4 times during a semester with different sets of pictures, in every occasion, the task was repeated 3 times as to provide one group with immediate feedback. The other group also repeated the task but did not receive feedback until after 4 days and analyzing the script of their performance. The improvement was analyzed in terms of Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF). The results show that complexity improves when students receive delayed feedback in the long run whereas accuracy tends to remain the same. Fluency varies among the different groups. These findings prove to be useful to lay foundations for future research on oral production and the importance of receiving feedback when performing oral tasks as well as on what the nature of this feedback should be based on its expected results.

Keywords: Feedback, speaking, interaction, task

Introduction

The question of how error correction and feedback affect both language learning and teaching is one that has caught the attention of researchers for years. Within the Second Language Acquisition field (SLA), plenty of research and studies have been done on different types of feedback and how they affect second language learners' acquisition.

Feedback is "generally considered to be a form of negative evidence, or information that a particular utterance is deviant vis-à-vis target language norms" (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Research has mainly focused on what is called corrective feedback - the feedback that is given in reaction to linguistic problems (Mackey, 2006). This is usually done through what is called meaning

negotiations, where learner and teacher/instructor interact and negotiate, via various mechanisms, such as feedback, clarification requests, comprehension checks and confirmation checks, utterances that have not been properly understood.

Corrective feedback promotes the production of modified output by the learner. This happens because the learners are led to notice their errors. Noticing has been shown to be “a potential mediator in the feedback-learning relationship” (Mackey, 2006). Thus, the learners, through feedback, are pushed to make reformulations, to make self-repairments and to produce modified output, which allow them to produce more accurate and complex forms. (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013).

Different types of feedback have been proposed. Two distinctions are the most frequently mentioned regarding oral production. The first one is based on explicitness. Feedback can be either explicit -stating that there is an error and giving information about the correct form- or implicit -leading the learners to notice their error and leading them to the correct form. (Swain, 1985; Gass & Mackey, 2006)

The second distinction that has been made is based on the moment in which feedback is given. Feedback can be immediate, right after the mistakes have been made, or delayed, time after language has been produced. It has been proposed that immediate feedback is more effective than delayed, as the delay may cause errors to be left unattended, and thus, fossilized. (Metcalfe, J., Kornell, N., & Finn, B., 2009). However, delayed feedback has proved to be better than immediate feedback in helping students improve their fluency and accuracy (Rahimi & Vahid, 2012). Consequently, the challenge is to find more evidence to support or question these claims.

To sum up, there are plenty of studies which seek to shed light on how the different types of feedback affect and promote language learning. Studies have shown that in most cases feedback promote learning; nevertheless, the need to have more insights on how and to what extent each type of feedback helps the learning process of learners still exists. This study focuses on the effects of immediate and delayed feedback on students improving their oral performance through the use of task repetition.

Task repetition has been a focus of research in the last fifteen years. Bygate (2001) studied the effects of task familiarity on L2 speaking by having students repeat a narrative task. The results showed improvement in terms of complexity at the same time that there was a loss in terms of accuracy. A similar study was carried out by Finardi (2008), who used a description task, which according to Robinson (2001) is less complex than a narrative task. Finardi analyzed the participants' results in terms of fluency, accuracy, complexity, and lexical density. Her results corroborate Bygate's since the participants also improved in terms of complexity at the expense of accuracy.

Both studies support the claim that there are tradeoffs in terms of complexity and accuracy. This implies, according to Finardi (2008), that Skehan's 1998 proposal of complexity and accuracy dimensions drawing on the same system, rule-based with focus on form, is valid. This would cause the problem of achieving improvement in both areas simultaneously. The validity of this assumption would also suggest that fluency draws on a different system, a memory-based system, which draws on formulaic expressions. This would explain why there was no gain in terms of fluency.

Goh and Burns (2012) have explained that task repetition helps learners with task achievement since “when they do the task the first time and repeat it a second time, the first

performance acts as a rehearsal for the second." (p. 147). This rehearsal helps activate the learners' mental schemata "which facilitates learning and memory." (p. 147).

The present study aims at analyzing to what extent immediate and delayed feedback contribute to the short and long term improvement of oral performance in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency when using task repetition.

Method

Participants

The participants were eight undergraduate university students enrolled in the EFL program. They were all part of the English Intermediate course, whose objective is, among others, to develop their English proficiency to a B2 level according to the CEFR. All eight students were taking the course for the first time. Their names have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.

Materials

The materials used were speaking prompts for section 3 of the FCE speaking test which were taken from the books *Cambridge First Certificate in English 1 and 2 for updated exam* from December 2008. Also, hand-outs were created to familiarize students with the language they could use for the task.

Procedure

All eight students were divided into two groups of four; each of these groups was divided into two pairs. Group 1 was composed by the couples who received delayed feedback whereas Group 2 was composed by those who received immediate feedback. A meeting was held every other week with both pairs in the same group so that they performed an oral interaction task. The task was always an interaction task in which they discussed a set of pictures and then agreed on an answer to a question about them.

The procedure with students in Group 1, DF (Delayed Feedback) group from now on, was the following: First, students came into an office in pairs. They were asked to perform the task 3 of the FCE speaking test in pairs. They did the task with the same pictures 3 times without receiving feedback. After they performed three times, they were asked to choose which one they felt the best with and explain why.

Then, the students were given a handout with useful tips and expressions. At home they were to write the transcript of the performance they considered best. Once they had done that, they were to write an improved version of their script using the handout to correct their weaknesses. Later, they met with the teacher who gave them feedback and discussed it with them.

As for Group 2, the IF (Immediate Feedback) group from now on, the procedure was the following: They performed the same speaking task as the DF group but while doing so the examiner took notes of their performance and after they finished the task, the teacher gave the students feedback. Moreover, the teacher gave the students the handout with useful tips and expressions in order to guide students' attention to the comments made on their performance. Students were allowed to take notes. Then, the students immediately performed the task again and the process was repeated. After three times, the students chose the recording in which they felt they performed better, but in contrast with the DF group, the IF group did not transcribe it.

In the second meeting the DF group went through the following process, the students again did the interaction task three times with a different set of pictures and then chose the one they considered best to later transcribe and analyze. In this second instance, the students were given another handout to go over at home. After writing the script and the improved version, the students once again met with the teacher to revise how they worked and to receive extra feedback based on what they noticed or failed to improve on. On the contrary, the IF group repeated the process carried out the first time.

In the third instance, the DF as well as the IF group followed the same process each one of them previously followed. This time there was no handout and the DF group was asked to use the two previous handouts in order to better their script of the best performance.

Finally, all pairs were asked to perform the task with a final set of pictures just once in order to measure the progress from the first time they did it.

The scripts of each performance were analyzed in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF), which will work as the dependent variables of the study. Fluency has been “conceptualized as the ability to sustain real-time communication through a focus on meaning.” (Skehan and Foster, 2001 as paraphrased in Finardi 2008, p. 33). In the analyses of the scripts, fluency was understood as the number of words uttered in each minute per turn. Complexity will be understood as “a willingness to use more challenging language, reflecting hypothesis testing and possibly restructuring of the language system” (p. 33). In order to measure the complexity of the language used in the task, the number of subordination used and the variety of questions (tag questions, negative questions, yes/no questions, wh- questions) used was considered, the latter because the task, in contrast with other studies (Bygate, 2001; Finardi, 2008), is an interaction task, and considering that complexity is related to the “objective difficulty that is inherent to the task,” (Rahimi & Vahid, 2012, p. 48) the necessity of asking varied types of questions in order to achieve the task becomes paramount. Also, the number of expressions of agreement and disagreement, such as *that is true* and *I think the same*, were also considered as elements of complexity for the interaction tasks. Finally, accuracy has been understood as the “the degree of conformity to certain norms.” (Rahimi & Vahid, 2012, p. 48). The degree of accuracy was measured by counting the number of mistakes related to subject-verb agreement, verb-tense agreement, lexical choice, double subjects, missing subjects, and question formation. In addition, following Rahimi and Vahid’s (2012) example, the amount of self-corrections was also counted. Self-correction was considered as positive for accuracy.

Results

The first step of the analysis is the comparison among the times they repeated each task in order to judge the impact immediate feedback had during the process of task repetition. First, the results of the IF group are shared and analyzed then the results of the DF group.

The following tables provide a summary of the analyses done with the scripts written for Caroline and Nathalie’s performances. Table 1 shows Caroline’s performance in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency whereas Table 2 does the same with Nathalie’s.

Table 1
Summary Task A, B and C – First IF couple: Caroline's performance

	CA1	CA2	CA3	CB1	CB2	CB3	CC1	CC2	CC3
Complexity	8	9	13	5	9	7	8	11	6
Accuracy (mistakes)	3	2	3	2	4	2	4	3	3
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	0	1
Fluency	1.5	1.5	1.96	1.94	2.15	2.08	1.88	1.96	1.6

Table 2
Summary Tasks A, B and C – First IF couple: Nathalie's performance

	NA1	NA2	NA3	NB1	NB2	NB3	NC1	NC2	NC3
Complexity	8	12	15	12	12	15	9	13	10
Accuracy (mistakes)	4	2	6	5	2	2	7	4	2
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	1	1
Fluency	2.27	2	2.14	2.39	2.23	2.3	2.12	2.26	2.15

The tables show a clear increase in terms of complexity. Although this usually happens at the expense of accuracy according to other studies, this has not been the case of these two speakers considering that the number of mistakes decreased in five of the six analyzed scripts after the first repetition, which was usually maintained. As for self-repairs there is no significant difference. Finally, fluency does not seem to be much affected with task repetition.

As for the second couple that received immediate feedback, tables 3 and 4 comprise the results of the analyses in terms of CAF.

Table 3
Summary Tasks A, B, and C – Second IF couple: Susan

	SA1	SA2	SA3	SB1	SB2	SB3	SC1	SC2	SC3
Complexity	6	9	10	7	1	11	8	12	8
Accuracy (mistakes)	2	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	4
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fluency	2.42	2.75	2.52	2.35	2.24	3.12	2.25	2.57	2.78

Table 4
Summary Tasks A, B, and C – Second IF couple: Brittany

	BA1	BA2	BA3	BB1	BB2	BB3	BC1	BC2	BC3
Complexity	12	17	13	6	16	13	14	16	12
Accuracy (mistakes)	6	13	8	6	5	4	4	6	3
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
Fluency	2.32	2.58	2.58	2.26	2.63	3.08	2.53	2.5	2.55

In the case of the second couple the findings are similar. Complexity noticeably improves as the tasks are repeated in all cases but one. Similar to the case of the previous task, the increase in terms of complexity did not happen at the expense of accuracy. The number of mistakes was maintained or diminished as the task was repeated.

Likewise the prior couple there is no significant increase of self-repair instances. As for fluency, there are not consistent trends to be explored.

Regarding the first couple of students, their results are summarized in the following tables:

Table 5
Summary Tasks A, B, and C – First DF couple: Ashley

	AA1	AA2	AA3	AB1	AB2	AB3	AC1	AC2	AC3
Complexity	7	5	3	2	5	3	5	12	7
Accuracy (mistakes)	0	1	4	2	2	2	3	2	3
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fluency	2.05	2.61	2.41	2.07	2.57	2.64	1.84	2.53	2.24

Table 6
Summary Tasks A, B, and C – First DF couple: Farah

	FA1	FA2	FA3	FB1	FB2	FB3	FC1	FC2	FC3
Complexity	5	4	5	6	5	11	9	11	12
Accuracy (mistakes)	4	9	4	4	8	13	9	5	8
Accuracy (self-repairs)	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
Fluency	2.02	1.84	1.74	2.04	2.46	2.49	1.73	1.77	2.19

Contrary to the previous group, Ashley and Farah's performances in terms of complexity do not improve with task repetition since in contrast with the IF group they were not provided with feedback between task repetitions. The time in which they did Task A, in fact, Ashley's complexity decreased. This shows that immediate feedback may lead to noticing even if it is just short-term as for its impact on production. Complexity increases or decreases depending on the occasion, which allows stating that without immediate feedback task repetition does not increase complexity regularly.

Similarly, accuracy decreases and increases since they are making similar mistakes and their attention has not been focused on them between task repetitions. It is quite clear that by not receiving any feedback, the students are unable to judge their performance and make the necessary changes to do better right away.

As for fluency there does not seem to be a clear pattern taking into consideration that students' fluency varies depending on the task; having said that, there might be a connection between the first task repetition and improvement in terms of fluency since that is something that repeats in all the cases but one.

The second couple that received delayed feedback and that worked with self-transcribing are Judy and Molly.

Table 7

Summary Tasks A, B, and C – Second DF couple: Judy

	JA1	JA2	JA3	JB1	JB2	JB3	JC1	JC2	JC3
Complexity	5	6	5	8	7	10	7	6	8
Accuracy (mistakes)	5	4	3	4	3	5	6	5	4
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0
Fluency	1.36	1.3	1.52	1.59	1.98	1.85	1.5	1.48	2.05

Table 8

Summary Tasks A, B, and C – Second DF couple: Molly

	MA1	MA2	MA3	MB1	MB2	MB3	MC1	MC2	MC3
Complexity	6	4	7	9	9	11	9	11	12
Accuracy (mistakes)	2	4	8	5	4	8	2	4	5
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Fluency	2.17	2.22	1.98	2.23	2.35	2.69	2.18	2.24	2.71

The cases of Molly and Judy coincide with Ashley's and Farah's. Judy's complexity in her speech does not show any clear tendency. Thus, it could be stated that it changes randomly due to not having feedback from the teacher.

All in all, the main commonalities in both analyses are that immediate feedback when repeating tasks leads to an increase in terms of complexity in the students' speech. In addition, since feedback is given on the students' performance, the students can get aware of what mistakes they have made in order to avoid them when they repeat the task. This study also has shown that even with complexity increasing the number of mistakes does not increase. The factors of self-repair and fluency do not seem to be affected by the immediate feedback since both groups reflect similar results in those terms.

As for the long term improvements, they will be analyzed by comparing the participants' first and last performances (A1 and D1). The results are summarized in tables 9 and 10.

Table 9

Summary first and last performance – Immediate feedback

	CA1	CD1	NA1	ND1	SA1	SD1	BA1	BD1
Complexity	8	5	8	9	6	10	12	10
Accuracy (mistakes)	3	1	4	2	2	0	6	6
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fluency	1.5	1.92	2.27	2.32	2.42	2.62	2.32	2.16

The table shows the difference of students' performance when receiving only immediate feedback in between tasks. Clearly there does not seem to be a significant change as for complexity in students who only received immediate feedback over a long period of time with the exception of Susan. As expected immediate feedback does not prompt students to notice the structures they can use nor increases their awareness in the long run.

Although accuracy in terms of self-repairs does not change, students did make less mistakes in terms of grammar in the last instance they performed the task, except for Brittany whose performance did not show much improvement in terms of mistakes produced.

In general, task familiarization seems to increase students' fluency levels as all but Brittany showed an increase in the number of words they were able to produce.

Table 10
Summary first and last performance – Delayed feedback

	AA1	AD1	FA1	FD1	JA1	JD1	MA1	MD1
Complexity	7	10	5	12	5	8	6	11
Accuracy (mistakes)	0	3	4	4	5	4	2	3
Accuracy (self-repairs)	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
Fluency	2.05	2.33	2.02	2.09	1.36	1.70	2.17	2.16

Students who received delayed feedback clearly showed a significant increase in terms of the level of complexity of the speech they produced. Although they increased their level of complexity is relevant to point out that the number of mistakes made did not increase but in the case of Ashley, who showed awareness of this and corrected herself two times. Similar to the previous group, students' fluency levels in general increased with the exception of Molly's whose fluency remained quite similar.

Conclusions

The results of this study support that giving students immediate feedback does help them momentarily notice particular mistakes or linguistic features that the teacher may want them to use. Students immediately repeating a task after receiving feedback are able to improve on their performance; however, these improvements are not kept through time. When they do not receive feedback, improvement is not observed. As for the other the students who receive delayed feedback and use self-transcribing, they are able to consistently improve their oral performance in terms of complexity without losing accuracy.

Additionally, it could be stated that task repetition does not necessarily lead to fluency especially if the speakers are more aware of using more complex linguistic resources and avoiding mistakes thanks to feedback.

Consequently, it is advisable for teachers to consider immediate feedback only if they will also consider delayed feedback and self-transcribing if they expect students to improve their oral performance in the long run. In fact, it is more important to have students work at home, analyze their scripts, notice mistakes and gain awareness of their strengths and weaknesses than spend time on giving students comments on what they are saying or what they have just said. In this light, task repetition is an effective tool for providing students with opportunities to raise their awareness and increase their linguistic competence even when interacting with another person.

In this light, further studies on teaching practices in Chile and other countries in connection with how teachers provide students with feedback after they perform oral tasks. After identifying

these practices, research could be done regarding the impact this feedback has. As a result of this, more information could be gathered, and, hence, researchers could suggest procedures based on the context of production for successful feedback delivery.

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