The provision of feedback types to EFL learners in synchronous voice computer mediated communication

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Abstract. This study examined the relationship between Synchronous Voice Computer Mediated Communication (SVCMC) interaction and the use of feedback types, especially pronunciation feedback types, in distance tutoring contexts. The participants, divided into two groups (explicit and recast), were twelve beginning/low-intermediate level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from different departments of a university in Southern Taiwan. Each group consisted of two sub-groups (SVCMC with and without webcam image). All participants completed spoken tasks with a student tutor who provided each of them with either explicit or recast feedback over four sessions. The data were collected from students' pre- and post-pronunciation performance and the tutor interview transcripts with the students. The findings of the study are presented in this paper.

Keywords: feedback types, SVCMC, visual cues, interaction dyads**.**

1. Introduction

Many Taiwanese university students do not speak English fluently, in spite of their high scores on English proficiency tests. Limited class time and lack of classroom interactions may hinder their oral proficiency development (Yang & Chang, 2008). Even when such interaction opportunities are provided to learners, they may not receive timely feedback and corrections of their pronunciation errors due to large class sizes.

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However, pronunciation is essential to oral communication, especially for beginners since phonetic errors can cause communication breakdown in interactions (Alastuey, 2008). Although pronunciation is vital to oral communication, this subject has not been sufficiently investigated in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Moreover, there is little research in terms of pronunciation feedback, a crucial factor in learning pronunciation (Neri, Cucchiarini, Strik, & Boves, 2002). Hence, this study aimed to investigate the effective use of pronunciation feedback types in SVCMC. As such, it proposed the following questions:

- Does SVCMC interaction affect EFL learners' pronunciation skills development? If so, how?
- Which feedback type is more beneficial to EFL learners' oral proficiency in SVCMC?
- Do different dyads have any effect on EFL learners' feedback reception? If so, what is the effect?
- Does the provision of image affect EFL learners' feedback reception? If so, how?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 12 beginning/low-intermediate level tutees in a university in Southern Taiwan. They were randomly divided into two groups (explicit and recast). Each group consisted of two sub-groups, SVCMC with and without webcam (see Table 1).

Table 1. Tutees' group division situations

Feedback	**Explicit**						**Recast**					
Mode	Webcam			Non-webcam			Webcam			Non-webcam		
Tutee	A	B	I	C	D	J	E	F	K	G	H	L
Original TOEIC score	530	365	440	500	630	530	420	310	600	635	470	560
Tutored by Tutor	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2

Two student tutors recruited from the university provided the tutoring sessions of the study. Tutor 1 was a female local senior undergraduate student who has been tutoring in the University English Center for over one year. Tutor 2 was a male Croatian first-year graduate student who had tutored for over six months. They received two-hour teaching and technology training before the study

2.2. Procedures

Each participant took four tutoring sessions (one hour/session) through Skype by using webcam and microphone. Their tutor provided each of them with either explicit or recast feedback in terms of their pronunciation/linguistic errors over four sessions.

2.3. Data collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this study. The qualitative data included tutors' and tutees' interview transcripts. The quantitative data included tutees' pre- and post–pronunciation tests, of which the total score was 100. One point would be deducted for one phonetic error. Then, the tutees' scores were transformed into z-scores to see if they had made progress from the study.

3. Discussion

Regarding research question 1, the quantitative data (see Table 2) revealed that SVCMC interaction had positive effects on the learners' pronunciation proficiency development.

A Wilcoxon Singed Rank Test revealed a statistically significant difference after the study, p=.002 (<.05). The learners' median scores on the pronunciation tests improved from the pretest (Md=84.5) to the posttest (Md=93).

The interview data showed that most interviewees (9 out of 12) agreed that the online environment is appropriate for them to develop pronunciation skills. However, some technology problems interrupted their communication. In addition, this online learning made some of them feel not 'real'. Six tutees said they preferred face-to-face learning.

Concerning research question 2, the quantitative data (see Table 3) revealed the two feedback types had similarly positive effects on the tutees' pronunciation

proficiency. There were statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest for both groups (p=.027).

Table 2. Comparison of the tutees' pretest and posttest

Feedback	**Explicit**						**Recast**					
mode	Webcam			Non-webcam			Webcam			Non-webcam		
Tutee	A	B	I	C	D	J	E	F	K	G	H	L
Scores (pre-)	81	74	82	83	90	91	77	78	94	86	90	96
Z-score (pre-)	-0.59	-1.58	-0.45	-0.31	0.68	0.82	-1.15	-1.01	1.25	0.12	0.68	1.53
Scores (post-)	91	77	86	94	97	94	92	85	97	90	97	98
Z-score (post-)	-0.08	-2.32	-0.88	0.40	0.88	0.40	0.08	-1.04	0.88	-0.24	0.88	1.04
Z-score (post)-(pre)	0.51	-0.74	-0.43	0.70	0.20	-0.43	1.23	-0.03	-0.37	-0.36	0.20	-0.49

(Total original score=100)

Table 3. Effect of the feedback type on the tutees' pronunciation performances

Descriptive Statistics

	N	50th (median)
Explicit (pretest)	6	82.5000
Explicit (posttest)	6	92.5000
Recast (pretest)	6	88.0000
Recast (posttest)	6	94.5000

A close look (see Table 2) at the tutees' performances showed that some tutees' perception of their improvement did not correspond to their real pronunciation learning situation. The intervention program only had positive effects on Participants A, C, D of the explicit group and Participants E, and H of the recast group. It was the most beneficial for Participant E (recast group) and the least to Participant B (explicit group).

The two participants (E and H) in the recast groups who improved their pronunciation skills after the study had higher received rates of the recast compared to the other four participants of the same group (Table 4). They tended to notice the recast better. The participants who received a lower rate of the recast seemed unable to sometimes perceive their error corrections.

In terms of research question 3, the quantitative data showed that the dyad did not seem to influence the tutees' pronunciation improvement (see Table 2) and the tutors had their preferred feedback use during the tutoring regardless of their assigned feedback type. Although both tutors indicated their preferred feedback use (Tutor 1 – recast feedback, Tutor 2 – explicit feedback), Tutor 1 used more explicit feedback, and Tutor 2 used more recast feedback to teach the tutees in both groups.

When asked about their satisfaction with the feedback, only Tutee J, K, and L (tutored by Tutor 2) expressed dissatisfaction. The quantitative data showed that Tutor 2 used more recast feedback, but his tutees did not receive most of the feedback, which might explain why his 3 tutees were dissatisfied with his corrections (Table 4).

Table 4. Numbers of feedback given and received during the tutoring

	Explicit						**Recast**					
mode	Webcam			Non-webcam			Webcam			Non-webcam		
Tutee	A	B	I	C	D	J	E	F	K	G	H	L
EF	90	302	52	121	86	25	163	156	27	161	176	21
RF	8	2	34	32	14	44	17	48	59	56	22	36
RF not received	2	1	18	19	10	32	3	28	53	34	9	25
RF received %	75	50	47	41	29	27	82	42	10	39	59	31

(*EF=explicit feedback, RF=recast feedback)

Concerning research question 4, both the tutors and all the tutees confirmed the positive effect of the webcam use. However, a Mann-Whitney U test revealed slightly significant differences in the pronunciation improvement for the webcam (*Md*=88.5, *n*=6) and non-webcam groups (*Md*=95.5, n=6), *p*=.053.

Although all the tutors and tutees agreed that using webcams had some advantages (e.g. availability of the tutor's mouth shape, mutual availability of facial expressions

and body language, focus and ease in communication, and perception of 'real' feeling), some tutees said they felt less embarrassed and nervous in non-webcam communication.

4. Conclusions

In sum, SVCMC interaction does affect EFL learners' feedback reception. Despite some disadvantages, most tutees confirmed the positive effect of online learning on pronunciation skills development.

In terms of feedback reception, explicit feedback was more easily perceived by the tutees whose original TOEIC score was lower in SVCMC. However, recast feedback was not necessarily more suitable for those whose original TOEIC score were higher; instead, it was appropriate for those with 'good' ears and high perception abilities.

In addition, different dyads did not seem to affect EFL learners' feedback reception, but the tutor's teaching style did. Both tutors and tutees could find ways to adapt to online teaching and learning.

Finally, the provision of image influenced EFL learners' feedback reception. Regardless of the advantages of webcam use, some participants felt more comfortable and courageous speaking in non-webcam situations.

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