15 Multimodal strategies allowing corrective feedback to be softened during webconferencing-supported interactions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on corrective feedback and examines how trainee-teachers use different semiotic resources to soften feedback sequences during synchronous online interactions. The ISMAEL corpus of webconferencing-supported L2 interactions in French provided data for this qualitative study. Using multimodal transcriptions, the analysis describes multimodal strategies used both in the error and resolution phases of the corrective sequences and in face work during these. These include combining visual and verbal modes in mitigation/remedial strategies and in role-switching cues.

Keywords: corrective feedback, videoconferencing, face work, multimodality, teacher-training.

1.   Introduction

In language teaching-learning situations, the provision of corrective feedback that indicates to a learner that his/her use of the target language is incorrect (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) forms part of the didactic contract. The interactionist approach to Second Language Acquisition sees corrective feedback as an

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important component of the learning process, as it allows learners to integrate attention to meaning and form (Loewen, 2012). However, for trainee-teachers (henceforth trainees) involved in telecollaborative exchanges, the initiation of corrective feedback sequences during which participants divert from the main topic to deal with a communication/linguistic problem can be difficult to manage. Firstly, because the interaction genre of 'pedagogical conversations' (Guichon & Drissi, 2008) requires trainees to alternate between the roles of conversational partner and teacher. Secondly, because the sequences are potentially 'delicate' moments in the interaction and there is a risk of threatening the learner's social face and, in turn, creating a serious risk for the smooth interaction (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011). This paper examines the multimodal strategies adopted by trainees when providing corrective feedback to soften the potentially face-threatening act of correction for the faces of their interaction partners.

2.   Methodology

This study draws on the ISMAEL corpus (Guichon, Blin, Wigham, & Thouësny, 2014) that structured data from a telecollaboration project between Business undergraduates at Dublin City University (DCU) and trainees at Université Lyon 2 (Lyon2) on a French as a foreign language Master's programme. DCU students were following a Business French module (CEFR exit-level B1.2) to prepare for future internships in France. The trainees were taking an online teaching module.

Due to differently sized groups in Lyon and Dublin, each trainee led six weekly online interactions with either one or two DCU learners using the webconferencing platform *Visu* (Guichon, Bétrancourt, & Prié, 2012). Interactions were thematic, focusing on Business French. After each 40-minute interaction, the trainees both viewed their online sessions to produce multimodal feedback reports and participated in group debriefings led by a teacher trainer.
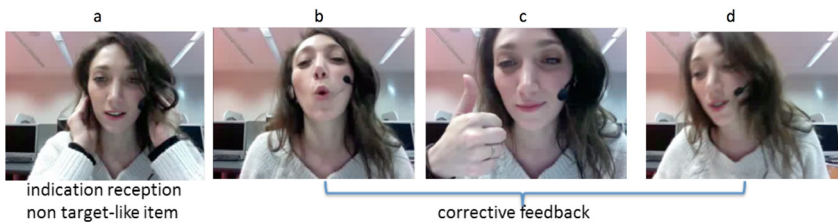
The study examined four interactions. Verbal transcriptions had previously been completed. Using *ELAN* (Sloetjes & Wittenburg, 2008), corrective feedback

sequences were isolated using Varonis and Gass's (1985) model for non-understandings. This model includes a *trigger phase* and a *resolution phase* that consists of an *indicator, response* and *reaction to response.* Co-verbal elements were also annotated (gestures, facial expressions, proximity to screen, posture). Two colleagues coded the sequences independently on a scale ranging from zero (very face-threatening) to five (highly softened). On this scale, three represented a neutral correction. Corrective sequences identified as being softened were then analysed with reference to Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1992) framework of face work and differences between highly-softened and sequences coded as slightly or very face-threatening were examined.

3.   Analysis

Due to space constraints, one corrective feedback sequence representative of the data is analysed here. The sequence occurs during a discussion about the usefulness of the trainee's feedback report. The *trigger* is the learner Alannah's pronunciation of the lexical item *prononciation.* The trainee's reception of the non target-like item is communicated in the visual mode: Although Adèle previously had her hands on her headphones, she closes her eyelids to focus more closely on the audio channel then moves proxemically closer to her webcam (Figure 1a).

Figure 1.   Semiotic resources to signal error and during resolution phase

A range of semiotic resources in the visual mode are then employed by the trainee in coordination with the audio modality during the *resolution phase*. These include exaggerating and holding facial expressions in order to illustrate
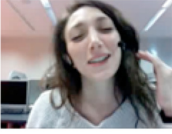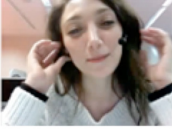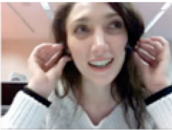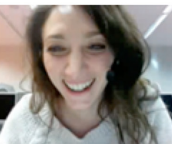
the mouth's position (Figure 1b); employing gestures to isolate the different syllables (Figure 1c), and using different body postures, moving diagonally across the screen, to accompany the syllabic rhythm whilst the learner repeats the target item (Figure 1d).

During the *resolution phase,* the learner expresses a more delicate face, perhaps because the sequence represents a relatively long parenthesis within the main interaction (1m38s), or because her repetitions did not immediately align with the target form. This is communicated visually through posture changes (head on desk) and facial expressions of frustration, and verbally through L1 exclamations (oh/ ma:n).

To soften the feedback, the trainee uses mitigation as a remedial strategy to repair the damage done to the learner's face. Utterances that place the problem on the difficulty of the lexical item itself, rather than the learner (Figure 2a), are employed. Here, the rate of speech was slower and was accompanied in the visual mode by a slight head inclination and a smile. The trainee also used flattery as a softening device (Figure 2b) to gain the confidence of the learner. In the visual mode, the trainee adopted a more caring posture by changing her gaze directly towards the webcam, smiling and inclining her head.
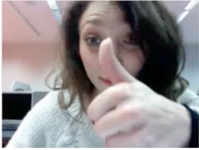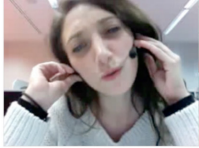
The trainee provides 'breathing spaces' by using gaze-change as a hesitation device when the learner was repeating or reincorporating the correction (Figure 2c). This slows down the interaction and gives the learner space to repeat the correction for herself rather than for the benefit of the trainee. Indeed, close webcam shots can be intrusive for learners if they last too long. The trainee, in moving her gaze away from focusing intently on her learner's image, contributes towards relieving the tension: the micro pause allows the learner to laugh at herself and this laughter is then shared between participants. It also allows the trainee to structure her thoughts, prompting a change in strategy and a signal to the learner that the text chat modality will be foregrounded (Figure 2d). Typing into the text chat allows the introduction of another pause that helps ease any tension.

Figure 2.   Mitigation strategies and breathers

a	Adèle	[it's difficult to say]ᵃ PRO-[N]UN-[CIA]-TION
		[the-] [the p-] the pronu[nas- hm]
	Alannah	[proNUNcia]tion: [((laughs))]
	Adèle	[pronunna:] ["i don't (inaud.)"] [p`o:/ nun:/] [(na-
	Alannah	ci)]
b	Adèle	[that's CUTE [even like that\] ᵇ
	Catriona	[((laughs))]
		[...]
c	Alannah	[p`o- pronon/] [proNUNnation/]ᶜ [euh: ((laughs))]
		[oh ma:n[((laughs))]
	Adèle	pro- [no\ no\ hang on hang on]ᵈ [watch wat-
		((laughs))] [PRO/]
	Chat (Adèle)	pro
d	Alannah	p`o-
	Chat (Adèle)	nun
	Adèle	NUN/

The clear closing phase of the sequence contributes to softening the feedback. *Role-switching cues* (Vidal & Wigham, in press) signal to learners that the trainee is moving between her roles of teacher and conversational partner. In this example, Adèle firstly closes the sequence visually by using a gesture to encourage the learner and recognise the progress made (Figure 3a). This gesture is for the learner: it is clearly framed and held close to the webcam. However, in the audio modality there is overlap because the learner continues to attempt to pronounce the target form. Adèle then further encourages the learner, using a gesture (Figure 3b) and a mitigation strategy to distance the learner from the difficulty (it's hard to say isn't it). The learner announces she is tired, perhaps to ask for the correcting parenthesis to be closed. The trainee immediately reacts by moving to her more symmetrical role of conversational partner and stating she understands that the learner works a lot. Accompanied by an empathetic pout in the visual mode, this closes the corrective sequence.

Figure 3.   Role-switching cues

a	Adèle	[mh/ [mh/][a]
	Alannah	[tion]
	Adèle	[TION\]
	Alannah	[pronon-/] [prononNAtion] + pro[nont]-<(laughing) ["oh/ god:"]> [((laughs))]
	Adèle	[good/][b] + [try to say it slowly] and [say it really slowly/ PRO]-NON-CIA-TION\
b	Alannah	PRO-NON-NA-TION:\
	Adèle	yes it's better than before/ **that's already**
	Alannah	**good**/
	Adèle	[hm/]
	Alannah	**[it's hard to say isn't it/]**
	Adèle	[I hope\ ((laughs))]
c	Alannah	So that that will help you / that will help you]
	Adèle	[ah I'm ti/ ah] I am tired today
		yeah: I understand\ you work[c] a lot\

4.   Conclusion

The analysis of the four different interactions revealed some initial multimodal strategies to soften corrective feedback. These included the use of role-switching cues in opening and closing phases of the correction: introducing the corrective phase with preliminary utterances to indicate the change in interactional posture and using gestures to move back into the role of conversational partner. Gestures were also used to suggest that the trigger was technical and not language-related. This use of the visual mode helped prompt self-correction. Gaze change and the text chat modality also allowed the introduction of 'breathers' into the correction phase, reducing pressure on the learner. In the verbal mode, mitigation as a remedial strategy, accompanied by changes in proximity and posture helped trainees show empathy with the learner. A follow-up study is planned to examine, with reference to Lyster and Ranta's (1997) corrective feedback taxonomy, whether feedback type affects the extent to which the feedback is softened and the semiotic resources used.

5.   Acknowledgements

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