An Analysis of the Meaning of "Natural" Concerning Oral Corrective Feedback

May 2018 – Volume 22, Number 1

Nobuhiro Kamiya
Gunma Prefectural Women's University, Japan
<kamiya@fic.gpwu.ac.jp>

Abstract

Second and foreign language teachers often say that they correct students' oral errors *naturally* in their classes. In fact, the operationalization of incidental oral corrective feedback also states that it arises *naturally* in a communicative task. This notion was confirmed in a study that I conducted with four ESL teachers in the U.S, three of whom mentioned *natural* use of oral corrective feedback concerning their teaching practices. However, through analyzing their interviews and stimulated recall data further, it was found that their definition of the term *natural* was not uniform, but threefold: oral corrective feedback was *natural* to them because (a) it is what people do in daily conversations, (b) it is done automatically and unconsciously, and (c) it is a part of the job as a teacher. This implies that, when investigating beliefs among language teachers, scholars need to further examine how each teacher defines the word in their use of oral corrective feedback because using the umbrella term of *natural* may conceal the fact that the meaning of the word may differ for each teacher.

Introduction

While I was working on a project that investigated the relationship between stated beliefs and classroom practices of oral corrective feedback (CF) among four ESL teachers, I noticed that, in their transcriptions, three teachers used the term *natural* in reference to their own use of CF without explaining what they meant. Although several terminologies exist for Focus on Form (e.g., Kamiya, 2018), a related concept with CF, they are made for the sake of research from the etic perspective, and thus, *natural* was not one of them. This made me realize that it was difficult to pinpoint what they intended when using the word, so I decided it was necessary to clarify the meaning that they assigned to the word by using multiple data sources.

Literature Review

With the intention and hope of the further development of the interlanguage of the learners, CF can provide second and foreign language (L2) learners with potentially beneficial negative evidence (and often together with positive evidence) concerning the target language. The degree of its use varies greatly for each teacher for a number of reasons, and those who are

reluctant may simply prefer to ignore errors in the classroom. Still, CF is commonly practiced by the majority of L2 teachers across various teaching contexts (e.g., Sheen, 2004), and it is said that CF "arises *naturally* out of the performance of a communicative task" (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004, p. 244; my italics henceforth).

The word *natural* is commonly used by both researchers and teachers when describing practices and cognitions of L2 teachers' use of CF. For example, referring to *recasts*, defined as the teacher's reformulation of the learner's errors while retaining their meaning, Mackey, Polio, and McDonough (2004) stated, "[a teacher] found it more *natural* to provide the correct form for students (i.e., recast) …" (pp. 318-319). Also, a teacher in the study by Vásquez and Harvey (2010) commented, "[m]ost teachers use recasts because this form of error correction comes so *naturally* to most of us" (p. 434).

Despite such commonplace usage of the term, there seems to be a lack of a clear explanation as to what is actually meant when researchers or teachers use it in association with CF. For instance, in Loewen (2012)'s review of the CF literature, the word *natural* appears four times, twice in the subheadings ("Does feedback occur *naturally* in the L2 classroom?" (p. 25) and "What are the characteristics of *naturally*-occurring feedback?" (p. 25)) and twice in the text ("Descriptive studies of *naturally*-occurring feedback in L2 classrooms …" (p. 25) and "Considerable research has investigated the amount and types of feedback in *naturally*-occurring classrooms …" (p. 30)). Also, Gass, Behney, and Plonsky (2013) state "[f]eedback occurs *naturally* and in classrooms" (p. 361); however, none of these articles provided the operationalization of the term.

There seems to be an assumption that what constitutes *natural* regarding CF is so commonplace that a tacit understanding exists for all (S. Loewen, personal communication, June 11, 2014) and thus, when it is discussed, it is referred to in an offhanded manner. Perhaps this assumption that *natural* must be understood instinctively is one of the reasons it is not even discussed in the literature. Indeed, upon the consulting of several recent reference works (Loewen & Reinders, 2011; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Robinson, 2013), literature review chapters and articles (Loewen, 2011; Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013) as well as scholarly books (Ellis, 2008; Ortega, 2009), all of which discuss some aspect of CF, but the word *natural* neither appears nor is explained. As such, there is clearly a case to be made to clarify what L2 researchers and teachers mean when they refer to *natural* use of CF. Otherwise, upon investigating beliefs of L2 teachers, researchers must tackle the data in lack of a system refined enough to enable them to precisely code teachers' recount of CF, wrongly assuming that the meaning of *natural* as regards their use of CF is the one that the researchers hold. The current paper hopefully contributes to revealing multiple meanings assigned to the word, which then can be applied broadly in the studies of teachers' cognition on CF.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The three teachers who participated in the present study were all native speakers of English, and were working for an intensive English program in a U.S. university. Cecile was in her twenties, working for the program as a teaching assistant (TA) and concurrently studying

TESOL as a first-year MA student. Although she was a TA, she alone had the full responsibilities for her classes. She had worked as an English teacher in Korea for two years before coming to the program. The only teacher education program that she had attended was a two-week orientation that took place before the teaching job overseas, and because her undergraduate major was literature, she was relatively inexperienced regarding classroom research and practices. John and Jim both had a MA in TESOL degree with a practicum and were working full-time for the program as highly-trained experienced teachers of English. John was in his thirties and had taught for 14 years (11 years in the US and three years overseas) in total. Jim was in his fifties and had taught for 30 years (12 years in the US and 18 years overseas) in total. All the names are pseudonyms.

Procedure

The data were collected through three classroom observations (50 minutes for each), which were video and audio recorded, and two interviews and two stimulated recalls (1 hour for each), which were audio recorded, yielding 6.5 hours of data for each teacher in total. All of the data were transcribed by the researcher and later proofread by native speakers of English while listening to the audio files. Although the primary focus below is on the interview and stimulated recall data, brief descriptions of the classroom interactions are added to clarify what occurred prior to the face-to-face discourses.

Analysis

The classroom data were analyzed quantitatively in order to count the number of errors by the students and the provisions of CF given by the teachers. An error was defined as an utterance made by a student that contained a morphosyntactically, phonologically, or lexically non-standard expression or a wrong word choice. CF was defined as a teacher's corrective move directly following a student's error regardless of the teacher's intention to correct the error. All of the errors and instances of CF were analyzed linguistically without considering any non-verbal behavior.

The taxonomy of CF in Sheen (2004) was used for coding. The complete list had seven categories; however, only those three shown here appear in this paper:

1. *Recasts* reformulate the whole or part of learner's erroneous utterance without changing its meaning.

2. *Clarification requests* signal to learners that their utterances were either not understood or were ill-formed.

3. *Explicit correction* provides learners with the corrected form while clearly indicting that their utterances were ill-formed.

The data from the interviews and the stimulated recalls were analyzed through *content analysis* in order to investigate how each teacher had defined the word *natural* concerning their CF practices. A second rater, who was a graduate student in applied linguistics coded 20% of the data. The interrater reliabilities are shown in Table 1. All of the discrepancies were discussed and resolved in a follow-up meeting between the second rater and the researcher.

Table 1. Interrater Reliabilities

Categories	Simple agreement rates
Identification of errors	86.2%
Identification of CF	80.5%
Types of CF	97.6%
Content analyses	84.2%

Results

The following sections will present the findings from the three teachers in ascending order based upon the amount of their teaching experience. Quotes were extracted from the interviews and the stimulated recalls along with the interactions between them and their students in the classrooms.

Cecile

Although Cecile said that she was unsure of how to use CF in her class due to her inexperience in teaching, she frequently used CF (*n*=42 in total), addressing 48.3 percent of errors on average. She used recasts (*n*=22), clarification requests (*n*=19), and explicit correction (*n*=1) throughout the three observations. In fact, despite her lack of confidence in teaching and use of CF, she stated that she might be using recasts, but "not consciously if I'm doing anything." This is due to her stance that recasts are "something people just kind of do *naturally* a lot of times," because giving them is "just like a habit of human nature." She also adduced an example, saying, "last night I went to movie. You know, oh you went to THE movies? I think I would just *naturally* do that."

Example 1 shows an instance of her recast. The main theme of this class was Thanksgiving Day. In this activity, Cecile distributed a handout with a cartoon on which depicted a turkey trying to eat a man. The man is saying something in order to dissuade the turkey from eating him, whose bubble was left blank. She told the students to create some funny utterance by him and write it in the bubble. After the students shared their ideas in pairs, she called upon some of them to read aloud what they wrote (see Appendix for the transcript convention).

> Example 1
> T: … Ok, [student's name], what did you write,
> S: **I'm not taste good.**
> T: *I don't taste good?* Ok, ((laugh)) What did you write, [student's name],

During the stimulated recall, she made the following comment on this interaction:

It was just *natural* … I know what you were trying to say so here I'll say it for you. Without being super conscious of which type of feedback or something I just, repeated back what I figured what she wanted to say.

Her comment here, "I just repeated back what I figured what she wanted to say," supports her comments from the interview in the sense that this CF could have potentially been given even when she was not teaching in the classroom. Therefore, judging from these comments from her, it seems that she used the term *natural* in the sense that CF is what people do in daily conversations.

John

Although the instances of CF that John used were similar in number to those of Cecile (n=39 in total), owing to the fact that his students made many more errors than those in Cecile's class, his CF covered only 18.5 percent of errors on average. However, the types of CF that he preferred to use were nearly identical to Cecile, which were primarily recasts (n=21) and clarification requests (n=15) in addition to explicit correction (n=3). He expressed his strong beliefs in the effectiveness of CF. However, he stated that, although he needed to consciously think about occasions to provide CF when he was younger using more of his "mental process," as he had become more experienced in his teaching career, he came not "to think about that so much anymore consciously" because he had other things that he deemed more important in his classroom. He stated that when his student made an error, "*naturally*, I would say, oh, let's back up for a minute." When referring to his present teaching manner, his intention was that "[CF] comes *naturally* … I think just very *naturally*, I tend to deal with those situations when they arise *naturally*."

Example 2 shows a case where he gave a recast. In this class, the whole class was discussing three questions on the definition of beauty as written on a handout. To the third question which read, "How does one's culture affect their ideas of what is beautiful? What is considered beautiful in your culture? What kind of impact does this have on your generation?," a female student expressed that she was unable to answer the question because each person had a different sense of beauty.

> Example 2
> S: Yeah. I cannot (if), you know, general standards because it's different **from person to other**.
> T: Ok. *From person to person?*
> S: Uhn uh,
> T: I think that's very true. Right? …

During the stimulated recall, he made the following comment on this interaction:

> R: So, what were you thinking then.
> T: Uh, I don't think I was thinking, I think that just happened very *naturally* at the end … she struggled, she had a little pause, she said person to others? And even, even a questioning tone. I said a person to person.

His statement "I don't think I was thinking," implies that this instance of CF was largely automatic and unconscious, which is consistent with his comments from the interview. Therefore, these accounts from him indicate that giving CF is *natural* to him in the sense that it is done automatically and unconsciously by him.

Jim

Similar to John, Jim also believed in the effectiveness of CF and used CF (*n*=44 in total), covering 27.3 percent of errors on average. In addition to recasts (*n*=26) and clarification requests (*n*=7), he used *explicit correction* to a large extent (*n*=11). Referring to the *natural* use of CF, he made an extensive comment:

> When you've got the time … when you're in (an) instructional situation where the student clearly looks at you as the arbiter of correct language … there's no time reason, there's no attention reason, there's no interpersonal reason not to say something, it seems only *natural* that you would say something. That's characteristic of your relationship … And the student expects certain things from you, that it's *unnatural* of you not to deliver … If the student wants me to correct major things, and we've got the time, it's my job.

Therefore, using CF is *natural* to him in the sense that it is a part of the job as a teacher. Furthermore, he mentioned the fluidity of the term owing to the relationship between teachers and students:

> I keep referring to what seems *natural* … but that's being colored by the fact that there is this personal relationship between me and the student … if it were a student, or if it were a non-native speaker … maybe I see 'em for one day or for one week … it would seem more *natural* for me to sometimes maybe not give them as much as I give them in my class.

In addition to this meaning, he also expressed the same account as Cecile, saying, "even when I'm talking with native speakers of English … we do … correction process, or it's just really clarification. And it's a *natural* part of communication," and adduced an example of using a clarification request:

> Let's say I'm talking to my wife … she says something like … I don't think um, Mitt Romney has, has any chance … in the New Hampshire Caucuses. And I say, the New Hampshire Caucuses? She says yeah. You know … where they try to sort out the, the nominee for the Republican Party. The New Hampshire, Oh, you mean the New Hampshire primary. And you know … it's like a *natural*, people make mistakes, and when other people respond to 'em, you have what sounds like a correction situation, which is really just a clarification situation.

He gave two more examples using countries names:

> You'll say, no, no … I would say THE United Kingdom. Not just United Kingdom … To me, it seems totally, totally *natural*. You often hear native speakers refer to THE

> Ukraine … I would say, no, not THE Ukraine. Ukraine. They don't wanna be called THE Ukraine anymore. There's nothing *unnatural* about that. [sic]

The context of these two examples are clearly not situated in the classroom. Rather, they are more likely to occur in conversations. In conclusion, the meaning of *natural* is twofold to him. It is a part of the job as a teacher and also what people do in daily conversations.

Discussion

The present study showed that these three teachers operationalized the term *natural* when referring to the use of CF in three different ways: CF was *natural* to them because (a) it is what people do in daily conversations, (b) it is done automatically and unconsciously, and (c) it is a part of the job as a teacher. It should be noted that these three options are not mutually exclusive because people may give CF in conversations automatically and unconsciously, combining (a) and (b). Nevertheless, keeping these two separate is still valid because giving CF in daily conversations does not exclude the cases of CF consciously given. In addition, a teacher may have only one of the two definitions in mind.

Effectiveness of CF in Relation to the Assigned Meaning

It should be pointed out that these three meanings may not be amenable to different sorts of CF to an equal degree. CF of (a) "what people do in daily conversations" consists of conversational moves, which include echoing and back-channeling. Thus, this meaning fits better with recasts and clarification requests than explicit correction because the latter is hardly used in daily conversations although it may be common in L2 classrooms. Evidently, all but one instance of CF given by Cecile consisted of recasts and clarification requests. CF of (c) "a part of the job as a teacher" is more consciously given to learners than that of (a) "what people do in daily conversations" and (b) "automatic and unconscious." As the teacher has a clear intention of corrective move, explicit correction may fare better with it than recasts and clarification requests. To corroborate this notion, Jim used the largest number of explicit correction among the three teachers. Finally, as CF of (b) can be provided "automatically and unconsciously" without deliberation, it can perhaps be assigned to all types of CF equally. John's CF is practiced in accordance to this hypothesis in the sense that, although the majority of his instances of CF were recasts and clarification requests, he still used explicit correction to a lesser extent than Jim.

Moreover, according to the *noticing hypothesis* (Schmidt, 1990), noticing may be crucial in order for CF to be effective, and for the sake of noticeability, explicit types of CF should be superior to implicit types of CF (Lyster et al., 2013); in fact, past studies generally, albeit not uniformly, show that explicit types of CF are more effective than implicit types of CF (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2000) (But see Li, 2010, for counter-evidence). In this sense, CF assigned to the meaning of (c) "a part of the job as a teacher" may supposedly show more robust effects than those with (a) "what people do in daily conversations" and (b) "automatic and unconscious" because teachers may tend to raise CF's saliency if they consciously endeavor to correct learners' utterances, feeling responsible for it as a teacher. Given this notion, explicit correction should be more effective than recasts and clarification requests. However, past studies have not reached a consensus in this regard; for instance, a meta-analysis

focusing exclusively on classroom-based studies shows that the effectiveness of explicit correction and recasts was statistically indistinguishable from each other (Lyster & Saito, 2010). This is partly owing to the fact that each CF type has a unique set of characteristics that is likely to influence its effects (e.g., Loewen & Philp, 2006). Therefore, in order to truly validate such a hypothesis (i.e., CF of (c) is more effective than that of (a) and (b)), the same types of CF categorized by teachers' intentions need to be compared (e.g., recasts unconsciously given versus recasts given with a corrective intention). Although there are a handful of studies that investigated whether learners are able to accurately understand teachers' intentions concerning their provision of CF (e.g., Mackey et al., 2007), and there is also at least one study that examined the relationship between beliefs on CF of its providers and receivers and its effectiveness from the perspective of *uptake*, a student's response directly following CF (Akiyama, 2017), to my knowledge, no study has examined the effectiveness of CF from the perspective of meaning that teachers assign to it; thus, this issue awaits further investigation.

Applying the Meanings to the Quotes

Recall that the outset of this paper recounted the lack in providing definitions of the term *natural*, citing four publications in the field. Therefore, below, I will discuss which of the three meanings detected above can be ascribed to each of those quotes. Interestingly, these papers each seem to assign distinct meanings in addition to another that was not found in the current study.

CF is what people do in daily conversations. First, in the quote by Gass et al. (2013), "[f]eedback occurs *naturally* and in classrooms" (p. 361), the term *naturally* possibly refers to the CF given outside classrooms as contrasted with "in classrooms," indicating the meaning of (a) "what people do in daily conversations." The remaining three quotes are all about L2 classrooms, so (a) deserves to be excluded.

CF is done automatically and unconsciously. In Vásquez and Harvey (2010), graduate students partially replicated Lyster and Ranta (1997)'s study using their own ESL classroom data, and found out recasts were generally ineffective in terms of the percentage of uptake, despite their frequent use. In regard to this point, a student noted, "[o]ne of the most surprising things for me is that recasts do not work in producing learner uptake. Most teachers use recasts because this form of error correction comes so *naturally* to most of us" (p. 434). Judging from the fact that the word *natural* is modified by *so, natural* in this context seems to be used in the sense of (b) because only this option carries the adjectives that vary in degrees, "*automatic* and *unconscious*."

CF is a part of the job as a teacher. Mackey et al. (2004) investigated how participating in a workshop about CF influences inexperienced ESL teachers' classroom practices and awareness of CF. One of the findings was that those teachers "demonstrated increased recognition of [CF] techniques and opportunities to use them in their classroom practices" (p. 318). The account of a teacher follows: "she had found it more *natural* to provide the correct form for students (i.e., recast) hoping that they would hear the difference and understand the correction" (pp. 318-319). Her hope for the development of the learners' interlanguage may have been derived from her recognizing the importance of CF through the workshop,

implying that she assigned the meaning of (c) "a part of the job as a teacher" to the word *natural* in this case.

Possibility of other options. Finally, Loewen (2012)'s quotes are originated from himself; therefore I decided to personally ask him what he meant by saying *natural* in his article. His response reads that *naturally*-occurring CF was "what occurs in the classroom when there is no external manipulation by the researcher" (S. Loewen, personal communication, June 11, 2014). Therefore, what he envisioned was totally different from those three listed above partly because he defined the term from the researcher's point of view whereas the other three were elicited from language teachers' accounts.

The existence of this fourth option cogently indicates that the meanings assigned to the word *natural* in the present study are certainly not an exclusive list. Rather, it further enhances the possibility that, when researchers investigate L2 teachers' beliefs on CF, researchers may blindly adopt the meaning derived from researchers' perspective to the word that teachers refer to concerning their use of CF even if teachers envision a meaning different from it. In addition, as can be seen in Jim's case, the word could have multiple meanings even within a single teacher. Thus, care should be taken not to assume that each teacher definitely applies only one option among all to the word in every case. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there has not been any systematic investigation conducted pursuing this issue, making the current study unique in this sense. A further collection of data may reveal cases in which teachers provide different meanings than those identified above.

Conclusions

It should be noted that the amount of evidence presented in the present paper is quite limited in its scope. Thus, any claim that is made in this paper should be regarded as tentative and exploratory. Still, the present paper found that the meaning of the word *natural* may differ for each L2 teacher. This suggests that L2 researchers need to examine what meaning each teacher assigns to the word regarding their use of CF because the lack of mutual understanding of its meaning may cause a misunderstanding of their beliefs, which may yield inaccurate results reported in academic papers. Therefore, when teachers say that they use CF *naturally*, researchers may ask them further questions to clarify how they define the word, and investigate this issue further, probably adding more options to the list provided in the present paper. Furthermore, teacher educators may be able to facilitate teachers' self-reflection through asking them to clarify what *natural* use of CF means to them, and use this as a tool for professional development.

It should be emphasized that other teachers and researchers may conceive of the idea of the word *natural* when considering CF in a quite different light from those in the present study. Nonetheless, here I have taken an important first step in uncovering the meanings assigned to the word by examining what these three teachers indicated during a discussion of CF and what they practiced in their classrooms. It is hoped that this study contributes to a better understanding of the cognition processes that L2 teachers employ when they opt to use CF.

Acknowledgement

About the Author

Nobuhiro Kamiya is a professor in the Department of International Communication at Gunma Prefectural Women's University, Japan. His research interests are in second language studies and English education in Japan.

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Appendix. The transcript convention

T	Teacher
S	Student
R	Researcher
(word)	Uncertain transcript
(( ))	Explanation of nonverbal action
[ ]	Transcript hidden purposefully (e.g., anonymity)
.	Falling intonation
,	Continuous (low-rising) intonation
?	Rising intonation
…	Utterance continues
CAPITALS	Emphasis
Bold	An error
Italics	CF