

# 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*

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## 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;

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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 lead 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

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