

The Comparative Fallacy in Studies on Corrective Feedback

Mikiko Suzuki

The concept of the comparative fallacy was introduced by Bley-Vroman (1983) in reference to interlanguage studies whose analytical concepts seemed to hinder the investigation of the nature of learners' languages. To exemplify the comparative fallacy, he introduced the interlanguage study conducted by Tarone, Fraunfelder, and Selinker (hereafter TFS) (1976) and discussed the validity of what they attempted to measure – interlanguage systematicity and variability. In his discussion, Bley-Vroman criticized the attempt by TFS to reveal the systematicity of learners' interlanguage from several angles. As a major criticism, Bley-Vroman pointed out that TFS's measurement of learners' systematic use of linguistic features was based only on obligatory or non-obligatory contexts from the perspective of native speakers of the learners' L2. Bley-Vroman argued that interlanguage research must focus on the construction of a linguistic description of learners' languages in their own right. In relation to this claim, Cook (1999) argued that second language teaching should be tailored to L2 learners' actual needs with the L2, which would consequently deny the idea of having native speakers of the L2 serve as role models in teaching. Cook contended that the variation in L2 users' goals should be respected, and that language teaching should not take a shortcut by using native speakers as role models.

The comparative fallacy seems to lurk in the area of corrective feedback research. The rationale for providing corrective feedback lies in a belief in the effectiveness of focus-on-form instruction. In classroom interaction, such instruction includes negotiation of form or negotiation of meaning. The negotiation occurs when there is a gap between what the teacher thinks is incorrect in learners' language use and the learners' interlanguage use for certain linguistic forms. The comparative fallacy in such negotiation can be found when the teacher provides corrective feedback to the utterances that the learner does not perceive as erroneous. Despite the gap in perception of learner utterances between the teacher and the learner, many corrective feedback studies analyze learner behavior (response or perception) to preceding corrective feedback from the corrective feedback provider's (teacher's) perspective. This perspective seems to be held by many researchers who conduct the studies.

This gap can be explained by paying attention to some raw data examples presented in research articles. For instance, Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) describe how they coded learner errors in their study on learner perceptions about interactional feedback. Specifically, Mackey et al. coded a NNS's utterance "The rear, rear [rleks]" (p. 480) as having a phonological error. Although they did not supply this particular NNS's L1 background information, mixing of [r] and [l] and devoicing of [g] to [k] are well observed linguistic phenomena in some languages. If the NNS's L1 had these alternative phonological rules, then this utterance might be a systematic IL representation of "the rear, rear legs" for the NNS, of which the NS researchers were not aware. If we follow Cook's (1999) suggestion that the L2 learners' L2 use should be treated with respect and analyzed in its own right, this phonologically "nontargetlike" utterance should not be coded as an error. Put another way, if the researchers shared the same L1 as the NNSs, they might not consider that utterance to be erroneous.

A similar issue can be found in Mackey et al.'s coding for the NNS's "semantic errors" (p.

431). When the NNS said, “he is on the tree,” the NS responded, “he is standing on the tree?” and the researchers coded the NNS’s utterance as containing a semantic error, since the NS “did not seem to understand” and “requested clarification” (p. 431). Even if we put aside the issue of whether the NNS’s utterance seems erroneous or semantically unclear to others, it is important to take into consideration whether the NNS would also admit that his or her utterance was erroneous. It is understandable that the NS wanted to clarify if “on the tree” meant “standing” or some other posture; however, that clarification might not be due to the “semantic error” of the NNS. After all, it is the NS or researcher who determines whether NNS utterances are errors or not. If the judgments are heavily subjective from the L2 native speaker’s point of view, then there is a danger of committing the comparative fallacy.

Aside from the error coding issues, there seem to be methodological issues in measuring learners’ perceptions of corrective feedback. Philp (2003) administered experiments to L2 English learners in three different stage levels of ESL question formation, in order to investigate their ability to recall a recast. Her hypothesis was that there was a correlation between learners’ proficiency levels and accurate recall of a recast. Learners’ noticing of recasts was operationalized as the learners’ cued, correct recall of a recast immediately following production of the recast. Setting question formation as the linguistic target, Philp divided the learners into three groups according to their stages in the order of acquisition for ESL question formation, based on the results of a pretest. Philp coded the immediate learner responses to recasts either “correct,” “modified,” or “no recall.”

This immediate recall methodology that Philp employed to gauge learners’ noticing leaves room for discussion related to the comparative fallacy. The treatment sessions were held one-on-one between a native English speaker (researcher) and an English learner. The learners were instructed to repeat the native speaker’s recast immediately after the two knocking sounds that followed the recast. According to this description of the treatment sessions, it can be imagined that the participants, regardless of their IL levels for question formation, were in a quite intense interactional setting. When the participants are assumed to have been under pressure to repeat the preceding recast correctly, it is questionable if the learners’ responses after two knocking sounds following an NS’s recast could be directly tied to their IL representations. Considering individual differences, there might have been learners who would perform below their IL levels because of the intense experimental setting, and some might have had exceptional working memory that would enable them to perform much better than in other settings. Additionally, the possibility of repeating the recast without noticing the error or correction should not be abandoned. Whether the learner actually noticed what they did or did not repeat would not be revealed unless the researcher conducted an introspective study after the immediate recall sessions. In this particular study, the immediate responses seem to be merely convenient pieces for the researcher to describe learners’ working memory capacity, not their interlanguage. As observed in the two studies above, analytical models for corrective feedback research tend to be discussed from a native speaker’s point of view, with a native speaker’s judgment on what to regard as errors, and with a native speaker’s interpretation of learners’ responses to preceding feedback. The comparative fallacy will be committed unless the research includes a description of what is behind the learners’ actual use of the L2; that is, learners’ perception of their L2 use. For instance, considering the claim that recasts are hard to perceive as corrective feedback by learners (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997), it can be surmised that, upon hearing a recast, learners may not even know whether they committed errors in their utterances. The reverse could also be true: Learners might consider their utterances erroneous, but the teacher does not perceive this, and

therefore does not provide feedback. These cases may result from incompatibility between learner utterances, which may or may not deserve corrective feedback, and utterances that actually received corrective feedback, whether or not they are considered erroneous. Referring to such discrepancies in perception with regard to corrective feedback, Gass and Selinker (2001) caution researchers conducting interlanguage analyses with a reminder that “errors are only errors from a teacher’s and researcher’s perspective, not from the learner’s” (p. 78). In order to avoid the comparative fallacy in corrective feedback studies, there is a need to collect introspective data from both learners and teachers concerning receiving and providing corrective feedback. As long as there is a gap in perception concerning the nature of corrective feedback between the two parties, the provision thereof may not fully benefit learners’ interlanguage development.

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Mikiko Suzuki is a doctoral candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include the role of learner uptake in classroom SLA, teacher-student and student-student interaction, and pedagogical interventions and their effectiveness on second language learning. Mikiko is currently working on her dissertation proposal, researching the relationship between learner uptake and second language development.