Learning from the transcripts of an oral communication task

Tony Lynch

This article reports a study of two English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes who used different forms of transcript of their performances on a role-play speaking task as the basis for reprocessing and improving their output. One class used transcripts produced by the learners themselves, and the other used extracts transcribed by the teacher. Analysis of two subsequent performances on the same task—the second after two days and the third four weeks later—showed that both procedures were manageable under normal classroom conditions, and suggests that the self-transcribing procedure was more effective in helping the learners to maintain higher rates of accuracy in the forms highlighted during the reprocessing activities.

Introduction

In an earlier study (Lynch 2001), I discussed an activity in which adult English learners transcribed and edited their spoken English, and then received teacher reformulation and correction. Comparison of original and edited transcripts, and analysis of the learners' interaction on task, indicated that they found the activity absorbing and useful. However, the study involved volunteer pairs working after class, so it remained to be seen whether self-transcribing would be feasible and effective under ordinary classroom conditions. The follow-up study I report here was designed to explore these two issues: the *feasibility* of managing self-transcribing and editing in class, and the potential *learning benefits* of noticing tasks based on transcripts.

Reprocessing output: a role for transcribing

The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain 1985) focuses on the modifications learners may make to output during negotiation of meaning, in response to negative interlocutor feedback, such as requests for clarification. 'Although no one has yet shown directly that these modified, or reprocessed, responses are maintained in the learners' interlanguage, the assumption is that this process of modification contributes to second language acquisition' (Swain and Lapkin 1995: 373). However, evidence from research suggests that learners make relatively inefficient use of negative feedback on their ongoing L2 speech, whether that feedback is implicit, as in teacher recasts (Lyster and Ranta 1997; Nicholas *et al*. 2001), or explicit, as corrections from teacher or peers (Truscott 1999). This may be because, when really involved in communication, learners understandably focus their attention on the content of what they are about to say, rather than

on potentially helpful signals from their interlocutor about what they have already said.

One could try to make immediate feedback more effective, but I have worked for a number of years on an alternative—providing offline feedback through post-task activities involving transcripts of learners' speech. The fact that these take place after the communicative event relieves the pressure on speakers, allowing them to spare more attention to their L2 output, as they are no longer preoccupied with formulating meaning. The feedback activities lead on to a fresh round of performances where the task is repeated. It has been argued that task recycling of this sort can allow learners to exploit their familiarity, gained during first performance, with the content and task demands, and with the process of formulating the desired meanings, so that they are able to devote more attention to getting the language right (Lynch and Maclean 2000; Bygate 2001).

My main reason for combining repetition with the use of transcripts is that they make learners' speech visible, and not merely audible on tape, and so increase the chances of learners' noticing, remembering, and producing reprocessed forms highlighted in feedback on the transcripts. Several writers have argued that learners benefit from transcribing, whether working with other people's words (e.g. Clennell 1999) or their own (e.g. Johnson 1996). Three advantages of learners' transcribing and editing their own spoken English, noted in my earlier article (Lynch 2001), were: the cooperative interaction between the learners; the trouble taken over fine detail in their output; and the opportunity for the renegotiation of meaning, as the learners identified language points which had not seemed problematic during the original performance but emerged as unclear at the transcribing stage.

Alternative forms of transcribing

I have used various procedures involving total or partial transcripts of learners' spoken English, two of which are relevant to this article. In the first, pairs rehearse and then record task performances, and later transcribe what they said (Transcript 1), before self- and peer-correcting that into a reprocessed version (Transcript 2), which the teacher reformulates into a 'final' version (Transcript 3), for discussion with the speakers. The second variant involves pairs making a recording of their paired performance, which the teacher takes away to listen to, in order to transcribe incorrect parts of the text. Each pair receives a series of transcribed extracts and has to correct them, before checking their changes with the teacher.

The main difference between these procedures lies in the source of the changes to the pairs' output. In the first variant, which I call *student-initiated* (SI), the impetus comes from the learners themselves, who are responsible first for transcribing their L2 speech verbatim and then for improving it in ways that occur to them once they see their words in black and white. In the second variant, *teacher-initiated* (TI), the teacher listens to learners' recordings, selects, and transcribes problematic extracts, which are given to the learners. The SI procedure generates higher learner involvement in identifying mistakes and is arguably more likely to create greater 'depth of processing', thought to play an important part in remembering and learning (Craik and Lockhart 1972). Whether SI or TI might represent

a more effective means of helping learners reprocess and remember L2 forms from their own performances is something I wanted to investigate.

The study

Research questions

Question 1
Can self-transcribing (editing, improving, etc.) be managed as a routine classroom activity?

Question 2
Does reformulation and correction of learners' transcripts impose an excessive workload on the teacher?

Question 3
Does the student-initiated transcribing procedure assist longer-term progress in spoken English more than teacher-initiated feedback?

Question 4
Do learners find transcript tasks a useful part of their class work?

Setting

The study took place during a 13-week EAP programme in 1999 preparing international students for entry into British universities. The first six weeks of the programme featured *scenarios*—role-plays involving potential conflict between student and officialdom in various forms. These were intended to practise spoken English in face-to-face encounters that our past students had found problematic.

Task

The scenario featured in my study involved a problem over a student's newly opened bank account. Half the class received the information for the Student role and half that for the Bank Teller role (shown in Appendix 1). Our usual scenario procedure comprises three stages: Preparation, Performance, and Debriefing. During Preparation the two half-class groups read their information and plan their tactics for the scenario, out of earshot of the other group. At the Performance stage, the class form pairs of 'Students' and 'Bank Tellers', sit at their recording tables, practise and then record the scenario in parallel. The third stage involves Debriefing, when the students return to their role group to compare the success of their various scenarios.

Participants

The participants in my study were 16 postgraduate students from Afghanistan, Argentina, the People's Republic of China, Iran, Japan, Korea, Libya, Spain, Taiwan, and Tajikistan. They had been placed in two classes according to their scores on a dictation test on entry to the programme: the eight students in Class 1 had scores of 21–67 per cent and the eight in Class 2 were in the range 58–90 per cent (roughly equivalent to IELTS Listening scores of 4.5–6.5 and 6.0–7.5, respectively). In weeks 2 and 3 of their programme, the two classes had three 90-minute scenario lessons each week with the same teacher (me), following either the SI or TI transcript procedure. This transcript-based scenario work amounted to nine out of 60 hours spent on speaking skills work during the programme; the remaining 51 hours were devoted to scenarios without transcript work (weeks 4–6), and discussion skills and presentation skills (weeks 7–13).

My study was designed to compare the results of using SI feedback and TI feedback in 'intact' classes, not specifically created for research purposes. Class 1 followed the SI procedure and Class 2 the TI procedure. I should stress that these procedures are not entirely discrete; the TI procedure does involve elements of self- and peer-feedback, but only after the teacher has highlighted (and limited) the forms to which learners should direct their attention for reprocessing.

Findings

Question 1
Can self-transcribing (editing, improving, etc.) be managed as a routine classroom activity?

This question boils down to two issues—space and time. In my particular teaching situation, the answer was 'yes' on both counts. First, as regards space, our pre-sessional facilities include a large Study Room with 14 audiocassette players set up on seven pairs of tables. Each learner can listen to their own cassette to transcribe their recording. When they have completed their initial transcript, they move to a separate computer laboratory to word-process their text. As to the time element of the question, our 90-minute lessons were sufficient for Class 1 students to have completed and agreed their verbatim transcript (Transcript 1) and then discussed, edited, and word-processed Transcript 2 by the end of Lesson 2. (Details of the activities in the two classes are shown in Appendix 2.)

Question 2
Does reformulation and correction impose an excessive load on the teacher?

No—at least, not in my teaching circumstances. I used the Tuesday evening to listen to the Class 2 cassettes and selected the mistakes I wanted to list for their second lesson on Wednesday. Most recordings of the Bank scenario were quite short, lasting 2–3 minutes. I needed to listen to them only once, note the mistakes and type them up for each pair, which took about 30 minutes. I used Thursday evenings to reformulate Class 1's Transcripts 2 into a final version (Transcript 3), which took me about 40 minutes. So the preparation required for both SI and TI procedures fell within the allowance at my Institute, which is roughly one hour's preparation for a 90-minute lesson. If the classes had reached our maximum of 12 students, I would have come close to the notional limit, but as it was I had some time to spare.

Question 3
Does the student-initiated (SI) transcribing procedure assist learners' longer-term progress in spoken English more than the teacher-initiated (TI) feedback?

The classroom data I collected to answer this question took different forms. For Class 1, I had Transcripts 1–3, and the audio-recordings made in Lesson 1 and Lesson 3. The data from Class 2 comprised the recordings from Lesson 1, my Lesson 2 feedback extracts, and the recordings from Lesson 3. These might provide evidence of the learners' short-term uptake of points from my Transcript 3. To evaluate longer-term gains, I asked the original pairs in both classes to make a final recording of the Bank scenario during week 6,

four weeks after they had worked on it in class. I recorded and transcribed these final performances, for comparison with the earlier recordings.

	Lesson 2			Lesson 3		Week 6	
	Mistakes highlighted by student (S) or teacher (T)			Re-used highlighted forms		Re-used highlighted forms	
Class 1	**S**	**T**	**Total**	**Wrong**	**Right**	**Wrong**	**Right**
Y and V	5	7	12	2	7	2	8
A and Sh	3	5	8	1	5	1	4
G and C	3	5	8	3	4	3	6
Total			**28**				**18 [64%]**
Class 2	**S**	**T**					
R and Se	—	5		1	2	2	2
T and Su	—	6		2	3	0	3
K and N	—	8		1	4	1	4
Total		**19**					**9 [47%]**

TABLE 1
Accuracy of performance, in Lesson 3 and week 6, of items highlighted in Lesson 2[1]

The 'Lesson 2' column shows the number of mistakes identified in the classes' recorded performances. In Class 1 there were a total of 28 mistakes—11 identified by the learners and 17 by the teacher. In Class 2, I highlighted 19 mistakes. The 'Week 6' column shows the number of points identified as mistakes in Lesson 2 which the pairs got right or wrong four weeks later, with the figure in square brackets indicating the corrected points as a percentage of the original mistakes. Overall, Class 1 (SI) students achieved a higher percentage than Class 2 of accuracy in week 6 on the points reprocessed in Lesson 2—at 64 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively.

Question 4

Did the learners' find transcripts a useful part of their work?

Both classes completed a questionnaire after the final recordings, giving their views on how helpful they had found the various elements of the scenario in improving their spoken English. Six Class 1 students and eight Class 2 students completed the questionnaire. As Table 2 shows, the 14 respondents expressed positive overall opinions of scenario activities, with Class 1 more enthusiastic than Class 2.

Class 1 (6 students)				
		not useful	**useful**	**very useful**
Lesson 1	Preparation	0	2	4
	Practice	0	4	2
	Audio recording	0	3	3
	Videotaping	0	3	3
Lesson 2	Self-transcribing and editing	0	1	5
Lesson 3	Reading transcript 3	0	1	5
	Audio rerecording	0	3	3
	Viewing video	0	3	3
Total votes		—	**20 (42%)**	**28 (58%)**

Class 2 (8 students)				
		not useful	**useful**	**very useful**
Lesson 1	Preparation	0	5	3
	Practice	1	3	4
	Audio recording	0	2	6
	Videotaping	2	5	1
Lesson 2	Mistake extracts from T	0	4	4
	NS audio + transcript	1	3	4
Lesson 3	Audio rerecording	3	2	3
	Viewing video	4	2	2
Total votes		**11 (17%)**	**26 (41%)**	**27 (42%)**

TABLE 2
Learners' perceptions of the usefulness of scenario work

Noticeably, Class 1 (the SI group) considered all eight elements of the scenario lessons either 'useful' or 'very useful', while one in six of the comments from Class 2 (TI) were 'not useful'. The more critical reactions from Class 2 applied particularly to the videotaping and replaying of a pair's performance in Lessons 1 and 3; almost half their expressed opinions on these two elements were negative. However, it is striking that all the students expressed positive, or very positive, views of the two transcript-based reprocessing tasks in their second lesson.

Discussion

Slips and errors

Of particular importance to my study is the distinction made by Corder (1967) between *slips* (accidental mistakes) and *errors* (systematically incorrect elements of their current interlanguage).[2] When learners edit a transcript of their own L2 output, one assumes they will notice only slips; errors can only be identified by someone else, especially a speaker of another language. Teachers working with monolingual classes might feel that both SI and TI procedures would work less well when both partners speak the same L1—unlike my classes, where all six pairs had different L1s. It might be argued that paired reprocessing of output should work better when partners with different L1s are able to spot errors in each other's L2 output. However, recent research involving self-transcribing in Japan found that even when learners share a mother tongue, working in pairs or small groups can lead to effective collaborative transcribing and correction, since different individuals will be more competent in different areas of the L2 and will be able to act as experts, in a Vygotskyan sense, on those areas (Mennim 2003).

The paired SI procedure in Class 1 created greater opportunities for both self- and peer-correction, as the partners were required to agree first on Transcript 1 and then on their corrections for Transcript 2. The reason for exploring the SI/TI difference was to see whether Class 1 learners' active involvement in transcribing their performance would bring greater benefits than Class 2's experience of reading transcribed extracts. What may have happened during the Class 1 SI procedure was that the learners engaged in an extended version of the monitoring (output searching and checking) behaviour likely to promote automatization of L2 speaking skills (Bygate 1998).

Language-related episodes

Swain and Lapkin (op. cit.) observed learners using a number of self-monitoring strategies in a study where they worked individually, composing and revising an essay, and were asked to think aloud (to a researcher) as they

did so. In my scenario study, the fact that the students worked on Transcripts 1 and 2 in pairs, not individually, meant they were encouraged to verbalize the process by which they were deciding how to improve their transcribed performance. This sort of interaction required them to engage in 'language related episodes'—leading to the sort of co-constructed mental processing which can generate new L2 knowledge or consolidate existing partial L2 knowledge (Swain and Lapkin ibid.). Although the data for my study did not include recordings of pairs' discussion about form, my earlier research with volunteers (Lynch 2001) did feature such interaction and found evidence of precisely this sort of co-constructed learning.

Reasons for differences between the classes' performance

It is possible that the difference in English proficiency level between the two classes, as measured by the dictation placement test, affected the learners' success in re-using correct(ed) forms in week 6. Since the learners in Class 2 had made fewer mistakes in their original recording, they might have been expected to make fewer in week 6, too. However, that difference is taken into account in Table 1 by showing the percentage figures for the classes: the lower-level SI Class 1 retained/used 64 per cent of their original corrected items, while the equivalent figure for the more advanced TI Class 2 was 47 per cent.

Another possibility is that improvement over the 4-week period under study stemmed from mere opportunity to repeat the task—indeed, I have advocated repetition and recycling of classroom tasks to help learners notice and consolidate (Lynch and Maclean op. cit.). However, although there could have been a practice or repetition effect, the same opportunity to repeat the task in week 6 was available to *both* classes—hence my focus on the differential percentage rates of accuracy in re-using the forms highlighted in the two classes' lessons in week 2. The fact that Class 1 achieved a higher percentage of accuracy than Class 2 suggests that factors other than mere repetition were at play, and I would argue that one such factor was the greater depth of processing involved in their self-transcribing.

Adaptations

My aim was to examine self-transcribing 'under ordinary classroom conditions'. Teachers interested in trying out self-transcribing may work with less (or more) technology than I had available, and may need to adapt procedures to suit their context. Firstly, all my students were able to record simultaneously, on individual recorders. Teachers working with a single recorder could record one pair of students at a time, unless—unlike me—they have access to a language laboratory.

A second point flows from the first. Each student in my study could listen to their own copy of their performance as they transcribed what they and their partner had said. In classrooms with a single recorder, teachers wanting their students to self-transcribe may need to lend the machine to a pair of students for them to make Transcript 1 together, rather than individually as in my case. However, collaboration of this sort would arguably strengthen the benefits of the transcribing process by provoking more talk about language.

A third logistical issue is my students' access to a computer laboratory where they could word-process their transcripts. Again, word-processing is

a luxury, not an essential; it is perfectly possible for learners and teacher to work with handwritten transcripts—and Transcript 1 is in fact done by hand.

Conclusion

This study explored the feasibility and potential benefits of two series of transcript-based tasks based on learners' spoken L2 output. It established that both combinations under study—student-initiated feedback in Class 1, and teacher-initiated feedback in Class 2—were manageable in the class time available. In addition, the self-transcribing and editing activities in Class 1 generated natural language related episodes where learners discussed the accuracy and appropriacy of parts of their output.

As far as potential learning benefits are concerned, the recordings made in week 6 showed that after a month's interval the Class 1 (SI) students, who had been active transcribers of their own oral performances, achieved a higher degree of accuracy in items which had been focused on in post-task feedback than Class 2 (TI), who had been passive users of the teacher's transcribed extracts from their performances.

The student numbers in the study were small but they are not untypical of pre-sessional class sizes in many countries. Given the very positive learner reactions to self-transcribing, in the years since I collected the data for this study, the SI procedure has been adopted in a number of our English courses, and seems to be well-received by both EAP and non-EAP students, and their teachers. I hope this article will contribute to the gradual accumulation of evidence of the advantages of output reprocessing activities and that *ELT Journal* readers will be encouraged to try out the transcribing procedures described here, adapted to suit their particular teaching contexts.

Final revised version received July 2005

Notes

1 Although both classes had eight students, full sets of recordings were available for only three pairs in each class; one Class 1 student left the course after week 3, and two Class 2 students were unavailable for recording in week 6.

2 Corder used *mistake* for 'performance-related errors', and *error* for 'systematic errors'; he therefore used *error* as both superordinate and hyponym. In this article, I use *mistake* as the overall term, *slips* for performance mistakes, and *errors* for systematic mistakes.

References

Bygate, M. 1998. 'Theoretical perspectives on speaking'. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 18: 20–40.

Bygate, M. 2001. 'Effects of task repetition on the structure and control of oral language' in M. Bygate, P. Skehan, and M. Swain (eds.). *Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing*. Harlow: Longman.

Clennell, C. 1999. 'Promoting pragmatic awareness and spoken discourse skills with EAP classes'. *ELT Journal* 53/2: 83–91.

Corder, S. P. 1967. 'The significance of learners' errors' reprinted in S. P. Corder. 1981. *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Craik, F. and **R. Lockhart.** 1972. 'Levels of processing: a framework for memory research'. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 11: 671–84.

Johnson, K. 1996. *Language Teaching and Skill Learning*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lynch, T. 2001. 'Seeing what they meant: transcribing as a route to noticing'. *ELT Journal* 55/2: 124–32.

Lynch, T. and **J. Maclean.** 2000. 'Exploring the benefits of task repetition and recycling for

classroom language learning'. *Language Teaching Research* 4/3: 221–50.
Lyster, R. and **L. Ranta.** 1997. 'Corrective feedback and learner uptake: negotiation of form in communicative classrooms'. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 19: 37–66.
Mennim, P. 2003. 'Rehearsed oral output and reactive focus on form'. *ELT Journal* 57/2: 130–8.
Nicholas, H., P. Lightbown, and **N. Spada.** 2001. 'Recasts as feedback to language learners'. *Language Learning* 51: 719–58.
Swain, M. 1985. 'Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development' in S. Gass and C. Madden (eds.). *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
Swain, M. and **S. Lapkin.** 1995. 'Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: a step towards second language learning'. *Applied Linguistics* 16: 371–91.
Truscott, J. 1999. 'What's wrong with oral grammar correction'. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 55: 437–56.

The author

Tony Lynch works at the Institute for Applied Language Studies, University of Edinburgh, where he teaches in-session and pre-sessional EAP courses and classroom-oriented courses in the MSc in Language Teaching. Among his books are *Communication in the Language Classroom*, Oxford University Press (1996) and a new edition of *Study Listening*, Cambridge University Press (2004). His recent research has focused on L2 task recycling, language learner identity, and EAP classroom interaction.
Email: A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk

Appendix 1
Instructions for the Bank scenario

Role A: Student
It is the week before your course starts. A few days ago you opened an account at a bank near the university and were given a piece of paper with the account number. Access to your account is by means of a cashpoint card, which you were told would be sent to your address. It has still not arrived. The money that you brought with you is nearly finished. You call in at the bank to see if you can take any money out. You have left the account number at home. The person you speak to is not the one you saw when you opened the account. How will you explain the position?

Role B: Bank teller
A foreign student comes into your branch, saying that they opened an account some days ago. They have not received their cashpoint card, and want to make a cash withdrawal. You ask for the person's name. Your records show that an account has been opened in a similar name but the spelling is slightly different. This makes you suspicious. You cannot authorize a withdrawal without proper identification. The customer would have been given an account number when they opened the account, so you ask for this. As the senior staff are out at lunch, you have to decide whether or not to let the customer have any money. How can you check the student's identity without appearing to distrust them?

Appendix 2
Procedures for the two classes in the study

Class 1 (SI)	**Class 2 (TI)**
Lesson 1 Monday	**Lesson 1 Monday**
1 Preparation in half-class role groups (A, B) 2 Practice in pairs (A+B) 3 Audiotaping in pairs 4 Review of recording in pairs 5 Individual Ss start transcribing 6 Back to role groups (A, B) for debriefing 7 Videotaping of one volunteer pair (A+B)	*as for Class 1*
	(Tuesday evening: T listens to cassettes and selects extracts for correction)
Lesson 2 Wednesday	**Lesson 2 Wednesday**
1 Individuals complete and agree Transcript 1) 2 They correct/edit its language 3 They word-process Transcript 2 4 Hand in Transcript 2 to T for reformulation	1 T presents extracts for correction 2 Pairs discuss and correct them 3 Listen to native speaker performance 4 Discuss native speaker transcript
(Thursday evening: T reformulates Transcripts 2 as Transcripts 3)	
Lesson 3 Friday	**Lesson 3 Friday**
1 T hands out Transcripts 3 2 Pairs discuss changes; then with T 3 T plays Lesson 1 video 4 Students comment 5 Lesson 1 pairs repeat, with transcript 6 Lesson 1 pairs re-record, without transcript 7 Feedback	1 T plays Lesson 1 video 2 Self-, peer-, and T-feedback 3 Lesson 1 pairs repeat, with notes 4 Lesson 1 pairs re-record, no notes 5 New pairs re-record, no notes 6 Feedback