Title of Project: An Examination of Nonnative-English-Speaking Students' Perceptions about the Effectiveness of Embedded Audio Feedback Provided by Nonnative vs. Native English-Speaking Instructors in Asynchronous Online Discussions

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Summary:

As online courses in US higher education continue to gain popularity, students from different countries and cultures have the opportunity to study under the same virtual "roof" while remaining physically and socially within their own countries and cultures (Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2007; Wang, 2006). Specifically, globalization, internationalization, and the cultural diversity of students have influenced the issues of planning, designing, and implementing online courses across geographic boundaries (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Therefore, instructors are increasingly looking to new and more effective techniques to promote learning among their students. One technique, audio feedback, has demonstrated that it can strengthen the instructor's ability to affect learning and more personalized communication with students (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007).

The present study is important because it was an attempt to 1) examine the effect of asynchronous embedded audio feedback on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' higher-order learning and 2) perceptions of the audio feedback versus text-based feedback when the students participated in asynchronous online discussions. In addition, this study examined how the impact and perceptions differed when the instructor providing the feedback was a nonnative English-speaking teacher (NNEST)[1] versus native English-speaking teacher (NEST) (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). Previous studies have revealed that EFL students face problems interpreting written communication with native speakers of English, which might further lead to miscommunication and can negatively impact EFL students' online learning performance.

A quasi-experimental design was used with audio feedback and text-based feedback as a within-subject factor, instructors' language background (NNEST and NEST) and students' level of language proficiency (high and low) as the between-subjects main factors. The students were assigned to the levels of language proficiency (high and low) and two types of instructors (NNEST and NEST), but all of them experienced audio feedback and text-based feedback. To accomplish this, an examination of the students' weekly online postings across the three time periods (pretest, posttest 1, and posttest 2) and the perceptions of the technique were carried out.

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[1] NEST/NNEST terminology is consistent with the literature of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Inc. (TESOL), A Global Education Association.

Two instruments were used to examine the effect of embedded audio feedback (a) the scoring rubric (Ertmer & Stepich, 2004), and (b) the audio feedback survey to examine students' responses to audio and text-based feedback (Ice, 2008). Specifically, for this study, the EFL students' weekly scores indicating the quality of online discussion posting for audio feedback and text-based feedback delivery methods and their perceptions on the survey were used as dependent variables. The three independent variables of this study were: (a) students' level of language proficiency; (b) embedded audio feedback versus text-based feedback; and (c) nonnative (NNEST) or native English-speaking (NEST) instructors who were providers of feedback. The quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, logistic regression analysis, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, an independent t-test, a mixed-effect ANOVA, and the two-way between-groups ANOVA.

The findings indicated the effectiveness of audio feedback and text-based feedback to promote EFL students' higher-order learning and to increase perceived effectiveness of both types of feedback. The results also indicated that there were no significant differences between the groups (NNEST and NEST) and the students' levels of language proficiency (high and low) on the increased quality of the students' online postings and their perceptions of audio feedback. However, the effect of audio feedback on the quality of online posting was different because it depended on the students' level of language proficiency. In this study, the students at the low level of language proficiency were more likely to drop the course and/or received the low scores on their online postings. The students with low level of language proficiency perceived that the audio feedback helped them retain the course information more than the text-based feedback. Finally, the students in the NEST group perceived higher motivation and retention than the students in the NNEST group.

This study's findings make an important contribution for moving the investigation of audio feedback effectiveness for EFL students forward and identifying best practices in asynchronous online environments. The results of the study suggest the importance of understanding how the EFL students' level of language proficiency and the instructors' language background can impact the quality of postings in the online courses. This is especially true when communication conducted in English, specifically when students receive audio comments recorded in English. Nevertheless, this study suggests that embedded audio feedback provided for EFL students can be viewed as an effective technique to enhance higher-order thinking and to increase the perceived effectiveness of the technique in an asynchronous online environment.

The results of the study provide further possible pedagogical implications. Audio feedback allows instructors to help the EFL students construct their own solutions to problems by interacting with others and learning from them because audio feedback occurs in the form of discussion among learners and through a comparison of internally structured knowledge (Mory, 2004). In addition, audio feedback can provide clearer and more personal feedback than text-based feedback. Thus, the finding on perceived feeling of involvement implies that using audio feedback for the EFL students can reinforce the sense of "being there" in order to remove transactional distance when teaching and learning occur in separate locations (Moore, 2007). Even though the low level of language proficiency enhanced participation in the asynchronous online discussion, this study revealed surprisingly unexpected results for the EFL students at the low level of language proficiency. In general, the technique was effective for them after the first posttest when the students at the low level of language proficiency ($M = 2.40$) outperformed the students at the high level of language proficiency ($M = 2.34$). However, the quality decreased after the second posttest meaning that in the future students at the low level of language

proficiency might need more guidance and help from their instructors to achieve a higher level of critical thinking. This implies that the students at the low level of language proficiency may need more individualized feedback, more thorough instruction, and more time to adapt to the technique. At the same time, the EFL students at the low level of language proficiency perceived audio feedback more positively for its clarity, better retention, personalization, and the instructor's care compared to text-based feedback. This finding implies that the technique can assist EFL students at the low levels of language proficiency in their participation in an asynchronous online discussion.

The following pedagogical implications can be used by instructors providing audio feedback in an asynchronous online environment for EFL students. First, audio feedback and text-based feedback provided by the NNEST and NEST can help the EFL students develop higher order thinking when they participate in an online discussion. Therefore, instructors are encouraged to provide both types of feedback to help EFL students develop higher order thinking when they participate in the online discussions. It would be reasonable to start from text-based feedback and give EFL students more time to adapt to audio feedback. Step-by-step implementation of audio feedback could help EFL students at the low level of language proficiency in their learning.

Next, when receiving audio feedback, the EFL students can benefit from the NNEST with the same native language, ethnicity, and cultural background to increase the quality of online postings because of the instructor's familiar accent and the structure of English used (e.g., the structure of English in this study provided by the NNEST was based on English to be taught in Russia). When providing audio feedback for EFL students, the NESTs can help increase the students' motivation, retention, and perceived feelings of the instructor's care. The NNESTs and NESTs need to be careful providing audio feedback in the form of discussion to EFL students (e.g., speed of the feedback should be normal, wording should be clear, and avoid unknown vocabulary). This can help EFL students internalize feedback better in order to transfer learning to a higher level of thinking.

Finally, the length of audio feedback is important, and it should not be too long. The audio file size should be small, and if possible, a mono recording should be used. A short, mono recording allows students to download the file easily when the Internet connection is slow. It is recommended that instructors who intend to provide audio feedback for EFL students keep the audio feedback short with direct comments on the major points of the student's online posting (e.g., how the student can improve the posting providing more examples).

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