Written Corrective Feedback in L2 Writing: A Critical Review

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The role/effect/effectiveness of corrective feedback (henceforth referred to as CF) in L2 writing has been the center of an over-a-decade-long debate. In this paper, I will review different primary and secondary studies on this topic with a view to finding out 1) what kind of work has been done to argue for (and/or against) the helpfulness of written corrective feedback in L2 writing, 2) what theoretical or methodological suggestions have been made regarding this kind of study, and 3) whether and how the question about how written L2 feedback relates to and/or can contribute to second language acquisition is addressed.

Keywords: ESL; Corrective feedback; Writing; Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

The role/effect/effectiveness of corrective feedback (henceforth referred to as CF) in L2 writing has been the center of an over-a-decade-long debate. In this paper, I will review different primary and secondary studies on this topic with a view to finding out 1) what kind of work has been done to argue for (and/or against) the helpfulness of written corrective feedback in L2 writing, 2) what theoretical or methodological suggestions have been made regarding this kind of study, and 3) whether and how the question about how written L2 feedback relates to and/or can contribute to second language acquisition is addressed.

The ongoing debate over the effect of written corrective feedback in L2 writing

Truscott (1996, 1999) takes a strong position on the topic in question: written CF should be abandoned for both theoretical and practical considerations. In theory, no conclusive evidence was produced showing the usefulness of written CF in improving the accuracy or promoting acquisition of the corrected items. Rather, the practice had potential harm for L2 writing. In practice, providing written CF is time-consuming and the time can be better used for other activities more conducive to the development of writing skills. Truscott's argument has been based both on the findings of the different studies on written CF (e.g. Kepner, 1991; Robb et al., 1986; Sheppard, 1992) and grounded on second language acquisition theories and research—in particular, the line of research on L2 learner's developmental sequences (e.g. Dulay & Burt, 1973; Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974). The rationale behind the assertion is that written CF that fails to target at the learner's developmental stage is not likely to facilitate learning since the learner is not ready to incorporate such

information; and since it is difficult to determine the developmental stage of a learner and each learner is at a different stage of development, there is next to no chance of written CF being beneficial to an L2 writing class. On top of that, there are practical issues that prevent learners from benefiting from this kind of feedback, as Truscott (1996) points out; these include but are not limited to: the often inconsistent and unsystematic feedback provided by the instructor, the feelings of frustration or even resistance on the part of the students, and inadequate attention to the feedback, etc. In a more recent paper, on the basis of a critical review of both controlled experiments such as Kepner (1991), Semke (1984), Polio et al. (1998), Fazio (2001) and Robb et al. (1986)—to name just a few, and uncontrolled experiments—for example, Ferris (2006, cited in Truscott, 2007, pp. 265-267) and Lalande (1982) among others, Truscott (2007) reiterates that, instead of being helpful, written CF could in fact have a small negative effect on L2 learner's accuracy in writing (p. 270).

In her rebuttal to the assertions made in Truscott (1996, 1999), Ferris (1999, 2002, 2004) has argued just as strongly for the effectiveness of written CF in improving accuracy in L2 writing, drawing on new studies that find positive relationships between CF and L2 writing improvement, measured differently in each study. In a review of previous studies on corrective feedback for L2 writing, Ferris (2004) argues that corrective feedback should continue to be part of the teaching practice in L2 writing class, as its usefulness has been corroborated by different studies from different lines of research (e.g. the role of corrective feedback in SLA studies in general—see Sheen, 2010 and Li, 2010 for a review; experimental as well as longitudinal studies of corrective feedback in L2 writing—see Bitchener, 2008) suggesting the usefulness of error correction in L2 writing (Ferris, 2004, p. 60). In the mean time, Ferris admits that further research is needed to resolve some, if not all, of the controversies surrounding this topic and lists some guidelines for future work on the topic and asserts that, as most of the studies carried out hitherto are not comparable in the most fundamental ways—the basic parameters, the instructional procedures and the research design (see Table 3, Ferris, 2004, p. 57), the on-going debate that draws on such studies cannot in any way help us find the answer to the basic question asked by Truscott (1996)—"does error correction help L2 writing?". Ferris insists that researchers should not come to any conclusion about the effect of corrective feedback in L2 writing until studies that are been pursued in a "sustained, systematic, and replicable manner" (2004, p. 55) have been conducted across different contexts and types of students and they consistently show a lack of positive effect of such error treatment.

How far has research on written CF in L2 writing gone?

It is evident from the kind of review of studies as conducted by Ferris (2003, 2004), Truscott (2007) and Bitchener & Ferris (2012) that no conclusive evidence has been produced in favor of either of the two positions on this topic. Bitchener & Ferris (2012) outlines "the key design flaws and execution shortcomings" of earlier studies, some of which Truscott (1996) has drawn on (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Robb et al, 1986), including a lack of a real control group, not establishing the initial level of accuracy or performance, and the failure to administer comparable writing tasks as a valid measurement of improvement (p. 51). In summary, it is difficult to utilize the often conflicting findings of the existing studies on written CF in L2 writing to make any generalizations due to the abovementioned and other methodological concerns.

What kind of work is needed?

In view of the controversy on the effect of written CF in L2 writing, scholars have made different suggestions about how to obtain reliable results on which valid claims can be made about the effect of written CF in L2 writing. For example, Ferris (2004) recommends that longitudinal research which is also reasonably controlled (involving a control group) be conducted to make the results more valid evidence in favor of or against the effectiveness of corrective feedback. In a

review of a number of theoretical perspectives and some empirical evidence concerning the role of written CF in the field of SLA, Van Beuningen (2010) argues for more attention to the learning potential of written CF (both comprehensive and focused) and to how written CF affects different error categories. More qualitative work is also called for, as a "detailed look at individual learners' sequential accuracy development" (Van Beuningen, 2010, p. 20) will enable us to gain more insight into how and when learners benefit from written CF. Meta-analyses of comparable empirical studies could also contribute to a better understanding of the role of written CF, as they may "identify gaps and conflicts in extant findings" (Kang & Han, 2015, p. 1).

So exactly what can and should researchers do with all the insights gained hitherto? Of course, researchers should take along cautions and suggestions from such analyses with a global perspective into corrective feedback to better steer their own manoeuvre. Bearing in mind all the methodological concerns and precautions proposed so far, researchers might want to, as Ferris (2004) suggests, take a step back and think about what kind of research can answer the basic question asked of intervention in SLA studies: what can help whom, when and how?

Numerous studies have been done following the guidelines and caveats proffered by previous work, demonstrating the merits of methodological rigorousness. Kang & Han (2015) exemplifies this kind of research effort. Their meta-analysis of 21 primary studies on written corrective feedback, selected on a rigorous set of criteria, produced a broad understanding of the efficacy of written CF and identified and assessed the impact of potential mediating factors, i.e. "factors that might mitigate its efficacy" (p. 1).

In addition, primary studies have been conducted that approached the role of written CF from different perspectives and the main focus in many of such studies has been on whether and how different types of feedback improve the accuracy of certain grammar aspects in L2writing. For instance, Bitchener (2008) proposes that studies should focus on certain types of feedback dealing with certain error categories (focused written CF)—a point elaborated in Bitchener & Ferris (2012). Research along this line includes Bitchener (2008), Ellis et al. (2008), Farrokhi & Sattarpour (2011), Sheen (2007b) and Sheen et al. (2009). These studies investigate the performance of the experiment group that received focused error treatment with that of unfocused and/or control groups and have shown a positive effect of focused CF on the accuracy of the relevant grammar aspect. However, Sheen (2010) indicates that their studies all concern the treatment of English articles and thus such evidence in favor of focused CF cannot be generalized to other linguistic aspects without further investigation. It remains to be proved whether focused CF works for other aspects of the English grammar or other languages, and more effort needs to be made along similar lines with comparable research design.

Other studies have dealt with other types of written corrective CF, factors other than the feedback type, and the interaction between factors that may have an effect on the effectiveness of written CF. The study by López, Van Steendam, & Buyse (2017), for instance, showed that comprehensive CF led to improvement in grammatical accuracy for both low and high proficiency learners. Stefanou & Revesz (2015) conducted a classroom-based study in which the effectiveness of direct written CF was investigated in relation learner differences, i.e. grammatical sensitivity and knowledge of metalanguage. Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken (2012) explored the effectiveness of two types of comprehensive written CF (direct and indirect) as well as the interaction between CF types and error types (grammatical and nongrammatical). Their study found that both types of comprehensive written CF led to improved accuracy and "different CF types have value for different error types" (Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken. 2012, p. 32).

What else can be done?

It is important to note that, while researchers should definitely investigate the "what" element, the ones they have control over, they should always bear in mind what Corder (1967) has long warned SLA researchers about: the focus should be on the learner. By investigating who

benefits from a specific kind of intervention, i.e. written corrective feedback, researchers are on their way to finding out how this happens—essentially, this might give us a better idea about the fundamental issue in SLA—namely, how acquisition happens. Some studies that focus on whether written CF can aid L2 development are mentioned in Van Beuningen (2010), including Bitchener (2008), Ellis et al. (2008) and Sheen (2007b). However, the focus of such studies is still on the final outcome as measured by comparing the result of a pretest and a posttest of the learner's accuracy and little is known about the on-line processing of written CF the learners go through and how it leads to learning and/or acquisition. Research along these lines should make a step further to investigate the relevancy and/or legitimacy of the theoretical arguments based on which they have selected a specific kind of CF method—for example, focused written CF in the aforementioned studies.

To understand this question, we need to look at on what theoretical grounds corrective feedback has been and will continue to be an important topic in SLA: there have been various theories predicting the usefulness of CF in SLA—Schmidt's (1990, 2001) noticing hypothesis and the arguments for a need of negative evidence made by different studies (referred to as "negative input" in Swain 1985, p. 245; see also the notion of "interactional modification" in Long, 1996, cited in Sheen, 2010, p. 170). It follows naturally that at least one line of empirical research should strive to find out how written CF relates to the theories that argue for the relevance of this practice to SLA, or L2 writing to be exact, and subsequently produce findings that might incorporate itself into larger theoretical frameworks, in addition to addressing practical issues concerning the adoption of corrective feedback (i.e. the pedagogical implications for L2 writing class). For example, research is needed on the process of how corrective feedback is incorporated by the learner—or, his/her uptake of the corrective feedback in L2 writing class to further strengthen the arguments made in Schmidt's (1990, 2001) noticing hypothesis. A recent publication by Bitchener and Storch (2016) pointed to and undertook research venues of such nature, examining "the potential of written CF to facilitate L2 development" (p. 1) both from empirical and theoretical (i.e. cognitive and sociocultural) perspectives. In their argument for the facilitative role of written CF in L2 development, Bitchener and Storch drew on concepts crucial to information-processing (e.g. noticing, attention) proposed by Schmidt and other cognitive/interactionist theorists (e.g. Tomlin & Villa, 1994).

This kind of perspective—one that connects research on feedback in L2 writing to a broader theoretical framework is only recently receiving more research attention, according to Bitchener and Storch (2016), who noted that "(t)he information-processing stages and conditions discussed…have not been the primary focus of the written CF studies until more recently" (p. 6).

Much remains to be done to promote this new line of research in order to gain more insights into the process of second language acquisition. There are, however, a few studies that have made such an endeavor. The work by Wigglesworth & Storch (2010b, 2012) well exemplifies this kind of effort. Their studies have been conducted in a socio-cultural framework, with a view to examining the effect of collaboration in pair work on (writing) development. The experiment in Wigglesworth & Storch (2012) compared the performance of three groups, two of which received different kinds of feedback (the third being a control group), focusing on the learners' interaction in which feedback is discussed. Development in this study was "operationalized as the opportunities to learn", and secondarily as the improvement shown in the writing of new texts. By "opportunities to learn", Wigglesworth and Storcj (2012) mean the quantity and quality of learners' discussion of the feedback—the language related episodes in which the feedback was discussed by the pair in second part/session of their experiment. In addition, the accuracy and complexity of the rewrites in the third part/session were examined in comparison. The findings of their study show that the level of engagement (in the pair interaction) is not a reliable predictor of the extent to which the feedback is accepted or rejected; instead, strong correlations are found between the level of uptake

of feedback and individual characteristics of the learners, including their knowledge, attitude toward the feedback, and beliefs about L2.

Wigglesworth and Storch (2012) also acknowledges the difficulty of determining the level of engagement by examining the audio-recorded data gathered in the experiment, due to differences in personality and interaction styles that might not be manifest in a particular session of interaction. Nonetheless, this kind of collaboration still enables researchers to gain some insights into how learners respond to the feedback, and further the understanding about how language acquisition takes place. The effect of affective factors on the uptake and retention of feedback that has been noted in their earlier study (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010b) is confirmed in Wigglesworth & Storch (2012). Wigglesworth and Storch's (2012) findings corroborate their argument that "earner agency plays an important role" (p. 92) in determining what linguistic features get noticed and whether or not the features and feedback get accepted, lending support to a socio-cultural perspective on L2 learning.

Some other studies have investigated the way students react to the feedback with the use of think-aloud protocols. For instance, in Sachs & Polio's (2007) study that compares the performance of different groups (control group, error correction group, reformulation group and reformulation + think aloud group) in a three-stage L2writing task, the participants' report of awareness was examined to gain access to the learners' thinking process and to make inferences about the noticing of the feedback. The participants who were asked to produce verbal protocols were given a chance to practice this kind of speaking about an original and revised versions of a piece of writing before actually taking the experiment so that they would feel less uncomfortable with this kind of method. Correlations were found between the noticing demonstrated in the verbal report and the subsequent revision of the features that were noticed. The finding lent support to the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), showing that there should be a certain degree of noticing in order for at least temporary learning to occur.

Nevertheless, reactivity effects were also observed in Sachs & Polio (2007) in which the think-aloud protocols were found to distract the participants' attention from their writing and thus affected their performance in the first experiment. A similar study was carried out by Qi & Lapkin (2001), in which much care was exercised to reduce the reactivity effects. The two EFL participants were given abundant opportunities to practice and get comfortable with the use of verbal protocols; they were also allowed to use a language of their choice in their verbalization. Interviews were also conducted with the participants to make sure the reactivity effects were kept at the minimum level. The results in Qi & Lapkin (2001) also show that "language-related noticing may contribute to the improvement of L2 writing"(p. 294). Another finding concerns the quality of noticing in the comparison stage, which was found to have "direct implications for final writing product" (p. 294). In Qi & Lapkin (2001), the effects of reactivity were not properly measured as there wasn't any control group (receiving feedback but not providing verbal reports) to compare these participants with on this aspect, though the use of think-aloud protocols didn't seem to have a negative effect on the experiment, according to the responses from the two participants in the follow-up interview. It is important to note that future studies that seek to gain access to the learner's processing of feedback should adopt verbal protocols with great care, every effort should be made to minimize the effects of reactivity and caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings of such studies.

Another aspect worth investigating is learners' attitudes towards written corrective feedback and their motivation, the latter of which is arguably debilitated by corrected feedback given by the instructor (Truscott, 1996). Students' reaction to correction in L2 writing class is described in a matter-of-fact manner by Truscott, and it is another aspect whose validity needs to be based on empirical data. Truscott might be in the right direction in stating that although students want and expect CF, their motivation might still be harmed by the teacher-delivered CF which is mostly likely to cause anxiety. However, his claim is more of a hypothesis than a tested

fact. While Truscott claims that some studies (Kepner, 1991, and Sheppard, 1992, cited in Truscott, 1996, p. 354) show the complexity of the students' writing was reduced who received grammar correction, there is only evidence concerning the marking of sentence boundary (Sheppard, 1992, cited in Truscott, pp. 332-333). The measure of complexity in Kepner (1991) is not discussed in Truscott, which casts doubt on the validity of the claim based on it. In summary, an argument based on such scarce and inconclusive evidence should be mitigated and tested against more empirical data. Researchers need to conduct systematical studies on students' reaction to CF and how their motivation and/or attitudes is affected by the feedback and need to include in their investigation different types of L2 writers in different (social, institutional and learning) contexts before any conclusion can be drawn about the effect of written CF on the students' motivation and about how students' motivation and/or attitudes influence the way they approach CF.

To address the question of how feedback is viewed by students, Ferris (1995b) conducted a survey on students' reaction to teacher response to their writing in a multi-draft classroom. The major findings are: 1) students generally took the teacher feedback seriously and paid a lot of attention to it (p. 47), 2) the most attention was accorded to teachers' comments on their grammar than to comments on other aspects of their writing, especially in their preliminary drafts, and 3) the majority of the students perceived teacher feedback positively (including feedback on grammar, mechanics, and organization), stating that the teacher's feedback had been helpful. Although written corrective feedback was only one type of feedback given by the teacher in the context of this study, the findings could still be taken as evidence of a positive attitude toward written CF on the part of the students.

Some other studies investigate students' preference of teacher feedback. For example, Radecki & Swales (1988) found that overall, the students held a positive or at least neutral attitude toward teacher feedback and felt satisfied about having their mistakes marked or corrected, although there was also a great degree of variation among the students in terms of their attitudes toward different types of feedback, grammar correction and other kinds of teacher intervention. The survey responses in Leki (1991) show most of the students were interested in receiving error correction and self-reported reading this kind of feedback carefully. Bitchener & Basturkmen (2012) also found that balanced feedback on both organizational matters and grammar of their writing from their supervisors was appreciated by graduate students with English as their L2. Some illustrative examples were given showing that at least some students in this group perceived the (written) feedback on grammar as useful (pp. 10-11).

Apart from asking the students questions to which the responses depend on past experience or imagination, there is another way of getting evidence about the students' attitude toward written CF. Storch & Wigglesworth (2010a, 2010b, 2012) point to this new direction for researching learners' motivation and attitudes with regard to written CF in L2 writing. Their investigation of the learner's processing of written CF in pair work shows that whether the participants incorporated the feedback into their revision of the first draft was related to their attitudes toward the feedback, their knowledge and belief about the language. On the basis of the findings, they argue for a socio-cultural approach to second language acquisition that takes into account learner agency. Their studies are also important evidence that research on written CF in L2 writing can and should be part of the intellectual effort to gain better understandings of the process of L2 acquisition.

Conclusion

In the foreseeable future, the debate over the effect or usefulness of written CF for L2 writing development is most likely to continue. This debate has served to advance our understanding of the role written CF plays in L2 writing and of other issues that have been brought to our attention in the course of the debate. A reflection on the previous work on this topic has not only revealed the areas that need improvement (e.g. methodology and design) in order for the

studies to produce generalizable and comparable results, but has also pointed to possible directions that will connect this line of research, which is mainly driven by and serving pedagogical concerns, to the broader range of research efforts to better understand second language acquisition. It is hoped that more illuminating discoveries will become possible about the effect of written CF and the ways research on this topic can shed light on the process of second language acquisition.

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