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Research Article

Corrective Feedback in Writing Essay in the L2 Classrooms

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language is a complex and satisfying activity which encompasses a variety of skills used and learnt. It involves a sum of tools being used by the teacher to help and motivate students to study and remember and later use this knowledge to improve their performance in either writing or speaking English. My study has tackled one of the elements used by the teachers to motivate students and help their writing skills get better and last longer. In this observation of corrective feedback i have studied and questioned opinions of both students and teachers with regard to this process. The data was gathered by means of questionnaires and face to face interviews with students and teachers. I have addressed two main issues: First, what is the effectiveness of corrective feedback in learning writing in English and second how long do the skills learnt by corrective learning last.

Keywords: Corrective feedback, error, writing

1. Introduction

Feedback is an activity recurring routinely in our lives. It can be an act or information that we receive or that we give as part of our daily routines. Sometimes it just a response or an act of the person we are interacting with and it is neither useful nor informative (for instance. One can respond: *That's a dumb thing to say!* to your inquiry or question). Corrective feedback, on the other hand, has a general purpose to give or lead to a positive change to the person or group to whom it is aimed at. It can be used to improve relationships between people, help to develop a person more, improve communication, performance and effectiveness of a student's/person, a group or even entire organizations. In the process of learning corrective feedback plays a significant role in students' learning and development. More than often feedback correction has been used as a tool for correcting students' grammatical errors as well as other errors while writing. In such context there are different views related to the usefulness and results of corrective feedback and to whether the teacher should use such tool as a means to improve the students' grammar, spelling, syntax etc. The two main views with regard to corrective feedback have been "The Case against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Class", by John Truscott (1996) and Ferris's (1999) "Argument for corrective feedback" with the first arguing against correction as means of improving student's skills. It presents a view supported by practical studies and surveys carried out by others and which repelled assertions made until then claiming in his article: "*The paper argues that grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned, for the following reasons: (a) Substantial research shows it to be ineffective and none shows it to be helpful in any interesting sense; (b) for both theoretical and practical reasons, one can expect it to be ineffective; and (c) it has harmful effects. I also consider and reject a number of arguments previously offered in favor of grammar correction.*". Whereas Ferris stood fast to the orthodox opinion that corrective feedback was an

important tool to be used in a teacher's everyday work although he didn't resolve the debate of whether it was ultimately helpful to students development due to lack of data on the matter: "*The issue of helping students to develop their written language skills and improve their accuracy in writing is too important to be ruled on hastily. As teachers, we can only hope that we will continue to find answers and discover ways to respond more thoughtfully and effectively to our student writers' needs".*

Other studies regarding corrective feedback have tackled different aspects both positive as negative of such tool. Al-Bakri, S. (2015) views CF as a device which is affected also by the teacher's own rules. He states "*There is empirical evidence that teachers' beliefs affect their instructional decisions*" and that "*all teachers sincerely want to help students improve their writing and therefore make a great effort giving WCF on students' writing despite their belief that only serious students benefit from the WCF ".*

Another study by van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) found that, "Direct correction is better suited for grammatical errors and indirect correction is better suited for non-grammatical errors," and that "Only direct CF has the potential to yield long-term grammatical gains". Storch, N. (2010) has viewed upon CF in controlled environments and its efficacy. She states that*"..'one off' treatments, often provided on a very restricted range of errors, and ignore the learners' goals and attitudes to the feedback provided and to improvement in accuracy.´* Bitchener, J., & Storch, N. (2016) have intertwined theoretical cognitive and sociocultural view focusing on the learning process rather than the editing process of CF. For some [12] selective feedback would mean that students would specifically focus more on their errors. Others have studied the experience of teachers and its effect on CF provided to students. Reza Norouzian (2015) in her study concludes that teachers experiences affects their results of CF and that "descriptive analysis highlighted some differences in their perceptions". Corrective feedback is seen pragmatically as a device not only to be used according to the teachers discretion but as an integrated part of the school curriculum. Vyatkina, N. (2011) in her study asserts that "CF has the potential to become an integral part of a FL writing curriculum" and that "writing is conceptualized not as a subsidiary language skill but rather as "a recursive, cognitively-demanding, problem-solving task" (Manchon & Roca de Larios, 2008)3. Other studies (Heift, 2008, 2010) have researched on Intelligent Language Tutoring Systems or computer based CF demonstrating that corrective feedback errors such grammar or spelling contribute to the improvement of short-term and long-term writing accuracy. Other aspects of CF include not only student's response but as Lee I. (2011) study indicates "*teachers' readiness to implement change in feedback as well as their perceptions of the factors that may facilitate or inhibit change*" should be included in the general definition or factors defining CF.

According to different authors corrective feedback is classified in different types and categories. Lyster and Ranta (1997) have identified different types of corrective feedback whenever a mistake in the lessons of French classroom teachers arose. [4] The category includes explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and repetition.

Ellis had another classification in mind focusing on typologies of corrective feedback on the "*the effects of written corrective feedback"* [5] he introduced two different "*sets of options relating to (1) strategies for providing feedback … and (2) the students' response to the feedback ".* The two types of strategies included different types of corrective feedback. The first part of strategies

[1] Liu, Q. & Brown, D. (2015). A methodological synthesis of research on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in L2 writing. The Journal of Second Language Writing, 30, 66-81.
[2] Ferris, D. R. (2014). Responding to student writing: Teachers' philosophies and practices. Assessing Writing, 19, 6-23
[3] Manchon, R. M., & Roca de Larios, J. (2008). Writing-to-learn in instructed language learning contexts. In E. Alcon Soler & M. P. Safont Jorda (Eds.), Intercultural language use and language learning (pp. 101-121). Netherlands: Springer Science / Business Media.
[4] Lyster, R., &Ranta, L. (1997). Corrective feedback and learner uptake: Negotiation of form in communicative classrooms. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 20, 37-66
[5]Ellis, R., & Sheen, Y. (2006) A typology of written corrective feedback types ELT journal 63(2), 97-107

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included : 1- Direct CF (where the teacher provides the student with the correct form.), indirect CF(where the teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction.), metalinguistic CF (the teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error.),the focus of the feedback (the teacher may try to correct all the students' errors or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct.), electronic feedback (where the teacher indicates an error and provides a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage.), reformulation (this consists of a native speaker's reworking of the students' entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact).

The other set including *Students' response to feedback* (For feedback to work for either redrafting or language learning, learners need to attend to the corrections.) where revision is required or no revisions are required and in this case either the students are asked to study corrections or the corrected text is given back to them. There is also a division between written feedback and oral feedback as mentioned by Sheen (2010) "*First, oral feedback is usually given to the student immediately after the language error is made. In the case of written feedback, there is often a delay at least for a few hours. Second, oral feedback demands that the receiver remembers it long enough to learn from it, while written feedback can be read several times. Third, oral feedback can contain much less information about errors made and about the content, than what written feedback has the potential to.*" In my work as an English teacher I have witnessed many times over and over again the same mistakes being made whenever students are asked to write especially during essays. Most of them tend to make similar errors such as spelling mistakes, improper person (e.g. using the first person instead of the third or vice versa), inconsistent tenses, long sentences without any proper punctuation (such sentences if separated by punctuation, would become two meaningful sentences each of them having their own though or logic), incomplete sentences (more than often students tend to forget verbs or subjects), dangling participles etc. These errors are present and tend to create a pattern in almost all classes I have taught despite the methods used to correct them. In this view I have carried out this study to understand the effectiveness of corrective feedback of students while writing essays and if it should be used by teachers as a means of improving students writing.

2. Research Questions

A set of questions and questionnaires were devised to probe into the role of corrective feedback and the efficiency of this tool. The study included the students' view as well as the teacher perspective on a practical level. The questions raised were the following:
    1. What are the gains of CF in essay writing?
    2. Can students improve their writing skills without CF?
    3. Is CF helpful to the teacher's work?
    4. How long does the effects of corrective feedback in students writing?
    5. What are the most profitable and useful strategies or CF in writing essays?

3. Methodology and Context of the Study

The study was conducted in two groups of students of two different branches the Faculty of Economics, Finance branch, University of Tirana and Faculty of Technical Medical Sciences, Physiotherapy branch, University of Medicine in Tirana, Albania. The study was carried out dividing the two groups in two different learning environments. Both groups were given as assignments the writing of four types of essays: argumentative, narrative, descriptive and expository essays. One group was given the assignment to write the essays but no feedback was provided to them during at no time. Whereas the other group was given corrective feedback commonly used during English classes. The survey with the questions was conducted after the assignment was finished. The group which was not given feedback had the essays only marked once after they delivered their essays. This group was explained the rules on writing each type of essay and were handed out some templates of each essay and no other feedback was provided. Whereas to the other group the teacher was more involved. Their drafts were revised over and over until they complied in full

with the specifics of each type of essay. Many types of feedback were used in this group both written and oral. After both groups delivered all assignments and after all were marked they were handed back to the students. After a period of three weeks passed this group of students were given the task to write an essay, only one of the types of essays. The last assignment was used to identify for how long the effects of feedback would last. In addition, teachers who taught in these faculties were interviewed and asked about their usual and preferred methods of error correction, feedback and the efficiency of such methods.

4.   Participants

The students involved in the study were first year bachelor students in the Faculty of Economics, University of Tirana and Faculty of Technical Medical Sciences, University of Medicine of Tirana, Albania. They included 2 groups with a total of 67 students. 44 students were females and 23 were males ranging from the age of 18-22 years. The students of both branches had a previous preparation for English language in high school. All of them had a placement test to choose the most appropriate method according to the branches. The students belonged to different levels ranging A2-B2. Part of this study were also English teachers (n=11) in these faculties who taught courses of bachelor and master students with A2-B2 levels.

5.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to enquire and study the effects of corrective feedback in the writing of essays of student's assignments. The usage of it as a means of improving student's mistakes and improving the teacher's day-to-day work. The study had two main goals: First, to look upon the student's feedback for corrective feedback as well as to understand the educators view on its usage. Second to understand the lasting effect of corrective feedback in the students' skills.

6.   Findings and Discussion

The study was carried out at the beginning of the school year in two different faculties. From the start the students were explained the rules and templates were handed out so they could start practicing. The first group received the basic rules on how to draft and write an essay and during the 4-weeks of the survey they were given no feedback of any kind. The only feedback they received were the graded essays at the end of each week. Whereas the second group received notes, corrections on grammar, spelling, semantics etc. They handed their first drafts or model essays which were corrected and handed back. This activity was repeated several times during each week. Both groups had 6 – hour classes each week. In the first group (*No feedback*) the classes continued as usual and the students had only their initial explanation to go on. According to the results of the essays the students in Group 1 differed in many aspects from those in Group 2. Many differences were noticed not only between the two groups but even within each group. The differences affected mainly students with lower English level (e.g. A1 – A2 level students). In these students many things improved such as structuring of the text of the essay, spelling mistakes of the words, grammar errors etc. These changes were mainly due to the repetition of feedback given, to the mimicking of their peers as well as to memorizing their own results in a short span of time. They had many things and skills they needeedto develop and often the same mistakes recurred. A major role in their improving and their initiative was played by the feedback given on each class by the teacher as well as the feedback they received from their peers. The environment they worked and wrote was self motivating where the low level students could interact with their peers of a higher level and more than often the teacher was only a facilitator within the peer-review environment. As the students reviewed their texts and received feedback from the teacher they discussed with each other on the correct form of the verb, the appropriate language structure, words they didn't know or the right phrases to be used in each paragraph. I noticed that in such classes they became more alert on the words they were using, arrangement of paragraphs, sentences and meaning of the text. The students were more careful on what they transmitted to the reader matched with what they

intended to transmit. Their improved involvement on such classes improved their responsibility with regard to their written work and raised their alertness to the most common errors but they still made. This was more obvious in connection to complex sentences as well as complex thoughts. During this study it was noticed that a few students began to sharpen their skill and began to think about strategies on how they could avoid mistakes such as write in plain and simple sentences, as well as thinking in plain and simple ideas which were easy to express. This "*writing responsibility*" they undertook improved their performance and a few of such skills acquired lasted more than the memorized words or phrases. In this context the students responded differently to the questions:

In response to the first question (Does corrective feedback help in you classes?) almost all of them answered "Yes, feedback helps" Only few of them did not see the feedback as being helpful. Almir said : "It helps me to focus more on my mistakes", Eda answered :"Teacher's feedback helps me to understand what I don't know and where to concentrate more next time I write so that I don't repeat the same mistakes" .

To the second question: Alesia said: " Yes, it helps. It helps me to pay more attention to some words I usually don't pay attention", Albino stated: " Yes it helps. Not only to correct my mistakes bur also motivates me to be more attentive next time" Iva said: Sometimes it helps because although I am corrected sometime i make the same mistakes." Fjoralba said: "It helps to be more careful on what I write". To the third question most students answered both. To the last question most students answered that they could remember and use the basic skills they had learnt at the beginning of the school year such as structuring of the paragraphs, fixed phrases/expressions or phrasal verbs (usually memorized by heart e.g. *looking forward to doing smth, take after smb etc.*). A part of the students interviewed (1/3 of the students) said that they couldn't use such skill at the end of the school year and that they had to go back to their teachers notes or their own notes to use them. Teachers were asked questions with regard to feedback and apart from a few differences it seemed that their way of thinking and their point of view followed a certain pattern. All of them used feedback both orally and in a written form. The most used forms of feedback in writing were red pen notes, tips and suggestions. Almost all believed that it improved structure, grammar and spelling and it was a necessary and irreplaceable tool in teacher's hands to help the student. With few differences on the frequency of feedback all of them made use of CF very often (some teachers used it on every class they taught) and believed that classes could not be taught without feedback. Most teachers believed that the skill earned by CF would remain with their students during the entire school year (which was in partial contradiction with the students answers).

7. Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study and literature review have shown that corrective feedback in writing is a very important tool in the development of a student's writing skills in teaching English as a Foreign/Second language and an irreplaceable tool on teacher's hands to motivate, push and help improve writing skills of their students. As of now English teachers abide strictly to the orthodox belief that CF is an integral part of the learning process as a formative device just like pen and paper and at its worst it can be a supportive means for the student's development in general and particularly in writing. For the student corrective feedback is a phenomenon which, despite a negative misconception due to its punishment like nature, is very important the same as the lecture from their teacher which helps them stay on their toes and incites to work. It is also one of the main elements which provides for a longer use of the skills learnt by the student. It aids the process and principles of learning not only while learning English but in the activity of learning in general thus instilling in the student the necessary methodology and way on how this activity occurs.

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