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# The use of models as a written feedback technique with young EFL learners



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## ABSTRACT

The difficulties involved in learning to write in a second language (L2) are well known and there has been much debate on the usefulness of written feedback in improving L2 learners' writing. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of model texts as a written corrective feedback technique through the analysis of what Grade 5 EFL child learners (aged 10–11) noticed as they (i) wrote a composition in pairs in response to a picture-based story, (ii) compared their texts to a model of the story, and (iii) rewrote their original texts. In order to isolate the effect of the feedback technique, the participants were divided into an experimental group (who completed all three tasks) and a control group (who only completed the tasks at stages 1 and 3). The results indicate that while models were useful for attracting children's attention to lexis and chunks of language rather than to grammar, task repetition may also have been responsible for improved performance in the revised written output in both groups. Proficiency levels were found to influence noticing and uptake from the feedback. This paper concludes with pedagogical implications for the use of model texts as a feedback technique with young language learners.

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## 1. Introduction

Due to the difficulties involved in writing in a foreign language (FL), the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) is an issue of concern to both teachers and researchers (Adams, 2003). It is assumed in the teaching of EFL writing that learners should be provided with feedback that encourages them to focus their attention on form-meaning mapping, thus facilitating the noticing of gaps between their own output and the target language (Sachs & Polio, 2007). One way of helping learners to achieve this is by providing them with written corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009).

A considerable amount of research has focused on investigating different types of feedback (see Bitchener, 2012 for a review). Written corrective feedback is used in this study as a general term that encompasses different techniques for correcting learners' written texts. Error correction (EC) is a direct feedback technique involving the explicit correction of learners' errors and provision of the correct form (Ellis, 2009:98). Most debate has centred on the use of error correction, as one of the most widespread forms of WCF in language classrooms. Some researchers have suggested that a large number of written marks, together with lack of clarity or consistency in teachers' corrections, can make it difficult for writers to identify what is incorrect in their written output (Hyland, 1998). In contrast, Sachs and Polio (2007) have suggested that the visual saliency of explicitly corrected errors may help learners to memorize and use the corrections, at least in the short-term. They make no

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claims, however, about the depth of processing or the long-term effects of this type of feedback. For Adams (2003), the minimal processing associated with EC may not push learners to test their hypotheses in depth, by reassessing and restructuring existing L2 knowledge, thus preventing the internalization and retention of new linguistic information over time.

There is also lack of consensus as to the value of WCF for fostering second language development. Truscott (1996) maintains that grammar acquisition is not a one-shot discovery and that the correction of learners' errors should be considered as a superficial and provisional activity. Other researchers suggest that feedback plays a fundamental role in promoting L2 learning (e.g., Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 2003). It is their contention that the explicit knowledge promoted through written feedback can have an impact *at least* on improving accuracy in writing, and may also activate internal processes, which contribute to the development of linguistic knowledge. However, extensive research on teachers' feedback practices in EFL contexts has shown that WCF is widely used as a form of assessment rather than for learning (Lee, 2007, 2008, 2009).

With the relationship between WCF and second language development still an open question, there has been increasing interest in exploring feedback techniques other than EC. Studies that have focused on more discursive forms of feedback including reformulations (e.g., Adams, 2003; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Yang & Zhang, 2010) or model texts (e.g., Hanaoka, 2006, 2007; Hanaoka & Izumi, 2012), have shown that both of these techniques can play a useful role in providing learners with solutions to problems in their written output. Most of this research has been carried out with adults and older learners, so that it remains to be seen whether children would also benefit from types of feedback different from EC. The aim of the present study is to explore the usefulness of model texts with young EFL learners. In doing so, we attempt to identify what features of language children notice from a model text and how the provision of feedback in the form of a model might influence their subsequent written output.

The rationale for expecting that written feedback might profitably contribute to improving second language writing rests on the theoretical grounds that we now outline below.

### 1.1. Output and noticing in SLA

The act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes not only the outcome of second language learning but is also a very important part of the process (Swain, 1985). In addition to receiving input, learners have to be pushed to produce *comprehensible output*, i.e., semantically coherent, syntactically accurate and appropriate sentences. The output hypothesis has taken shape through the description of four ways in which output might play a role in the process of L2 learning (Swain, 1993). These include providing learners with opportunities to (i) formulate and test hypotheses, and obtain subsequent feedback on the encoding of meaning in the L2; (ii) generate *metatalk* that allows them to reflect on form-function relationships; (iii) automatize their encoding procedures; and (iv) notice the gap between what they want to express and what they can express. On the basis of these arguments, it is conceivable that the use of WCF may act as a catalyst for the successful allocation of learners' attentional resources during output tasks.

The importance of attention and noticing plays a crucial role in L2 learning. Schmidt and Frota (1986) were the first to claim that "those who notice most, learn most" (p. 313), while Ellis (1995) affirmed that "no noticing, no acquisition" (p. 89). More recently, Hanaoka (2006), suggests that "noticing is a prerequisite for L2 learning to take place" (p. 167). Schmidt (1990) distinguished two levels of awareness: awareness at the level of noticing and awareness at the level of understanding. Although a higher level of awareness may not always be necessary for SLA, Schmidt contends that there can be no learning without, at least, the "conscious registration" of language elements in the input.

The *noticing/triggering function* of output brings together these two theoretical predictions in support of models as a feedback technique. When generating language, learners may encounter gaps between what they want to say and what they are able to say, and so become aware of what they do not know or only partially know in the L2. Awareness of their own linguistic limitations ("noticing the hole") might be promoted by the use of model texts which can provide alternative lexical, grammatical and propositional input in such a way as to encourage spontaneous noticing of new L2 forms (Hanaoka & Izumi, 2012). In this respect, the act of producing written output in the L2 may prime learners to notice differences between their interlanguage and the target language models they receive in the feedback.

To date, there are still no clear answers about the language learning potential of WCF (Bitchener, 2012). Despite positive results obtained in studies of EC with a limited number of linguistic structures (Bitchener, 2008; Sheen, 2007), further research is needed to demonstrate the role of WCF in enhancing L2 development. As suggested by Bitchener (2012), the relationship between the noticing processes prompted by WCF and L2 development depends crucially on "(1) the nature of the information provided [in the feedback], (2) the frequency with which [learners] receive it, (3) the proficiency level of the learner, (4) the ability of the learners to relate it to other linguistic knowledge that s/he may also be processing and consolidating, and (5) the complexity of the linguistic focus" (p. 360). In the present study, we focus on the nature of the information provided to the learners through model texts and the proficiency level of the learners.

### 1.2. Reformulations and models as feedback techniques

As against the specific nature of EC, reformulations and models are based on the idea of providing learners with whole texts as feedback (Abe, 2008; Adams, 2003; Hanaoka, 2006, 2007; Hanaoka & Izumi, 2012; Izumi et al., 1999; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Yang & Zhang, 2010). Reformulation was defined by Levenson (1978, in Qi & Lapkin, 2001: 281) as "a native speaker's rewriting of an L2 learner's composition such that the content the learner provides in the original draft is maintained, but its

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