



The effect of focused and unfocused indirect written corrective feedback on EFL learners' accuracy in new pieces of writing



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 May 2014

Received in revised form 15 May 2015

Accepted 8 June 2015

Available online 25 July 2015

Keywords:

Accuracy

SLA

Written corrective feedback

Indirect feedback

Focused feedback

Unfocused feedback

ABSTRACT

The study examined the effectiveness of focused as opposed to unfocused written corrective feedback (WCF) on the accuracy of weak verbs and the total accuracy of all structures in new pieces of writing. Undertaken in a Taiwanese college context, the design of the study was quasi-experimental, comprising a pre-test, treatment, immediate post-test and delayed post-test. Three writing tasks were used for the tests and two different types of WCF represented the treatment: focused indirect WCF and unfocused indirect WCF. A control group received no WCF. The findings for the analysis of weak verb accuracy and total accuracy were remarkably similar. In both cases, parametric tests demonstrated the focused and unfocused indirect WCF groups not only outperformed the control groups in the immediate post-test but also in the delayed post-test. It is suggested that learners in both the focused indirect WCF group and the unfocused indirect WCF group were unable to notice the target structure or notice it with metalinguistic understanding following a single episode of WCF; instead, the indirect WCF likely served as a signal for the learners to push their output in their overall accuracy when writing new pieces of writing in the post-tests.

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1. Introduction

Focused written corrective feedback (WCF) comprises the provision of WCF on one or a few pre-selected structures, while unfocused WCF entails providing WCF on all or an array of structures (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). Sheen (2007) suggested that focused WCF would reduce the attentional strain on learners and hence facilitate the likelihood of becoming aware of a target structure, whereas unfocused WCF would increase the attentional load and thus reduce the probability of learners' awareness of a structure or structures. A way to investigate this suggestion is to compare the effectiveness of focused WCF and unfocused WCF. The study presented here aimed to provide insight into the relative effectiveness of focused as opposed to unfocused WCF.

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2. Literature review

Both skill acquisition theories (e.g., Anderson, 1983) and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) inform WCF research. While the former provides a rationale for the process of automatization, the latter allows an insight into cognitive processes deemed to underlie acquisition, namely, noticing (Schmidt, 1990), noticing with metalinguistic understanding (Schmidt, 2001) and pushed output (Swain, 1995). Indeed, different combinations of WCF strategies and WCF responses likely facilitate these three cognitive processes. However, the system-learned as opposed to item-learned nature of different structures may serve to make certain structures more or less treatable by WCF when accuracy is measured in new pieces of writing. Before providing a review of the current state of the WCF literature, these positions will be discussed in greater detail.

2.1. Skill acquisition theories

Skill acquisition theorists claim that learning a language is the same as learning any other skill. Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought Model (1983) suggests knowledge starts with declarative knowledge and through practice it gradually becomes automatized procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge represents explicit knowledge about a language (e.g., metalinguistic rules) whereas procedural knowledge is implicit knowledge embodied by the subconscious production of a language. The Power Law of Practice (Anderson, 1982), furthermore, states that as a function of increasing practice, the amount of improvement decreases. This has been demonstrated in an SLA study with an artificial language (DeKeyser, 1997), and findings from research comparing instructional methodologies with and without multiple episodes of WCF are also suggestive of the role of WCF as practice (Evans, Hartshorn, & Strong-Krause, 2011; Hartshorn et al., 2010). While acknowledging that practice is likely an important process in automatizing structures, Ellis (2009) questions solely relying on skill acquisition theory for two reasons. First, it does not take into account the order in which learners acquire a language, which has been borne out by research (Johnston, 1985). Second, it is questionable whether the acquisition of all L2 features begins with declarative knowledge. Ellis argues that explicit knowledge has a facilitative role rather than a direct effect on implicit knowledge.

2.2. The Interaction Hypothesis

In Long's (1996) revised Interaction Hypothesis, he proposed there are two types of input: positive evidence and negative evidence. Positive evidence is essentially the provision of what is grammatically correct. It represents comprehensible input. Krashen (1981, 1984, 1985) claimed that comprehensible input alone was responsible for language acquisition. However, Long's (1996) review of comprehensible input found that it was insufficient by itself to account for acquisition. It was demonstrated in Canadian French immersion studies that L2 French learners were able to perform as well as L1 speakers on comprehension and production tests (Hart & Lapkin, 1989), but learners in these situations continued to make extensive grammatical errors (Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1991). The learnability of certain structures was another issue. Some structures or hypotheses from an L1 can be overgeneralized onto L2 structures (White, 1989), and positive evidence cannot deal with such errors. Long argued that in addition to positive evidence, negative evidence was also required to deal with these issues of grammatical accuracy and learnability. The role of positive evidence then is to provide interactionally modified comprehensible input that is usable for acquisition, while the role of negative evidence is to provide interactionally modified corrective feedback about what is not grammatical and correct, and this serves to facilitate acquisition through cognitive processes deemed to underlie acquisition (i.e., noticing and pushed output). The provision of positive evidence and negative evidence occurs during the act of negotiating meaning when there is some breakdown in understanding between two speakers or a writer and a reader (e.g., teacher).

While Long's Interaction Hypothesis was originally designed with oral communication in mind, it is equally applicable to written communication. Both oral corrective feedback and WCF provide opportunities for the provision of negative evidence. Sheen and Ellis (2010) note that corrective feedback can be explicit (a learner is aware of information provided) or implicit (a learner is not aware of information provided). It can also be input providing (facilitates noticing processes) or output prompting (facilitates pushed output). WCF is always explicit and whether or not it is input providing or output prompting depends on the type of WCF and how a learner is required to attend to the WCF.

2.3. Cognitive processes deemed to underlie acquisition

The provision of direct types of WCF, indirect types of WCF and no WCF can be seen as potentially facilitating the cognitive processes deemed to underlie acquisition consistent with the Interaction Hypothesis. Direct WCF indicates and locates an error has occurred. It includes two types of WCF: direct WCF (the crossing out of an error and provision of its correct form) and direct WCF plus metalinguistic explanation (providing direct WCF and a metalinguistic explanation of the rule). Indirect types of WCF are also divisible into two types. Metalinguistic coded WCF provides some type of code to indicate and usually locate an error has occurred (e.g., 'sp' for spelling or 'vt' for verb tense). The second type of indirect WCF is simply referred to as indirect WCF. It usually locates and indicates an error has occurred by underlining an error or circling an error and providing a cursor (ˆ) to indicate and locate a structure is missing. If a learner is asked to study direct or indirect WCF for a period of time, the feedback becomes input providing and can facilitate the processes of noticing (Schmidt, 1990) and

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