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Application of online annotations to develop a web-based Error Correction Practice System for English writing instruction



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ABSTRACT

Error correction and peer feedback have been recognized as vital in second language writing development. This study developed a web-based error correction practice mechanism which was attached to an online annotation system for EFL writing instruction. In this system, students input new essays with the Essay Editor and the teacher marked students' errors with the Annotation Editor. Students could read the corrected essay and the results of error analysis through the Viewer. Based on the results of error analysis through the Error Correction Practice Recommender, the system recommended an essay to the student to practice error correction and to implement peer feedback. Following the peer feedback exercise, the student could compare his/her corrections with the teacher's corrections on the same essay through the Viewer. A pretest–posttest study was also conducted to evaluate the effects of using the system on 35 EFL students' writing performance and peer feedback performance. The experiment consisted of four rounds of writing and peer feedback practice. The results of students' writing error ratios and error correction ratios showed that the system was effective in improving students' written accuracy and error correction performance in the peer feedback process. A range of recommendations for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Corrective feedback, also known as “error/grammar correction” (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, p. viii), refers to any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). For second language (L2) writing teachers, providing feedback to students is an important but challenging task, which involves complex factors (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). For instance, in order for corrective feedback to be successful, it needs to be “processed and acted upon” (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012, p. 368). The processes require more constructive opportunities (Paulus, 1999; Yeh & Lo, 2009), effective techniques (Ferris, 1995, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lee, 1997), and careful training and modeling (Berg, 1999; Min, 2005; Stanley, 1992; Zhu, 1995). In the past, a number of studies have been conducted to explore how to enhance corrective feedback activities in L2 writing (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Kubota, 2001; Lee, 1997; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Paulus, 1999; Rinehart & Chen, 2012).

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As an alternative to paper-based corrective feedback, computer-mediated corrective feedback has been used to enhance L2 writing (e.g., Ho & Savignon, 2007; Lowry, 2002; Tuzi, 2004; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Yang, 2010). The special features of online technology provide an interactive approach to support corrective feedback. For instance, with networked computers, learners can do peer reviews online anywhere at any time (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Specifically, learners exchange writings and feedback through the Internet (Tuzi, 2004) and are able to observe each other's writing processes and corrective feedback recorded online (Yang, 2010). Different from face-to-face corrective feedback, computer-mediated feedback not only offers opportunities for learners to compare one's own texts with those revised by others, it can also "reduce psychological pressure on learners who do not like to give feedback in face-to-face situations" (Ho & Savignon, 2007, p. 273).

With the advancement of computer technology, it is important to design interactive learning environments to support corrective feedback and peer review in writing. In the past, some researchers have attempted to apply online annotation technology in error feedback and error analysis (e.g., Guardado & Shi, 2007; Yeh & Lo, 2009). Annotations are the notes or glosses a reader makes to himself or herself, which are a natural way to record comments in specific contexts within a document (Wolfe, 2002). Annotation tools can scaffold different note taking styles and information strategies, which can help students learn to move from reading to writing (Barger, Gupta, Grudin, & Sanocki, 1999; Wolfe, 2002). Online annotation systems also allow a group of readers to make notes on the same copy of a text and provide readers opportunities for interaction with and learning from others in the context of a common text. Such features transform the web into an interactive medium in which students are no longer limited to viewing content passively but are actively giving and sharing commentary (Barger et al., 1999; Lo, Yeh, & Sung, 2013; Wolfe, 2002). To expand the research in computer-mediated corrective feedback, the current study applied online annotations to support error correction practice in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) we wished to design and develop a web-based error correction practice system to implement error correction and peer feedback activities by applying online annotation techniques and (2) evaluate the effects of the system on students' written accuracy and peer feedback performances. The system not only allowed the users to give and receive feedback but also provided a convenient interface for students to implement error correction practice on essays with similar error distributions. In addition, the system provided an environment for teachers to do strategy training for error correction practice and peer feedback activities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Corrective feedback in second language writing

Corrective feedback includes responses consisting of an indication that an error has been committed, the provision of the correct language form, or an offer of metalinguistic information about the error (Ellis, 2007). Many researchers are concerned with whether corrective feedback has any effect on written accuracy (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen, 2007) and writing development (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Kubota, 2001). For instance, Ferris and Roberts (2001) conducted an experimental study with 72 ESL (English as a Second Language) students who were randomly assigned to three groups: a "codes" group, a "no codes" group, and a "control group" that received no error marking. Their findings showed that the correction ratio of the two groups who received error feedback was significantly higher than the correction ratio of the control group. The effects of corrective feedback in reducing the number of errors were also confirmed in Ferris' (2006) study with 92 ESL students, which found a significant reduction in the number of errors from the first draft to the last draft.

Several studies have also investigated students' attitudes toward corrective feedback and suggest that L2 students need and expect different types of feedback on their written errors (e.g., Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Hyland, 2003; Lee, 1997; Rinehart & Chen, 2012). For instance, in Ferris and Roberts' (2001) study, students preferred feedback with error labels attached to errors rather than feedback that was simply marked but not labeled. Hyland's (2003) study revealed that students believe repeated feedback will eventually help them and that without the feedback they will fail to note the errors and improve. Accordingly, as Rinehart and Chen (2012) suggested, L2 learners' preferences for different types of feedback at the revision stage should be carefully considered.

Processing feedback in pairs has also been shown to help learners to engage more deeply with the feedback (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). To date, a number of studies have looked at the benefits of peer feedback on L2 writing (e.g., Berg, 1999; Freeman, 1995; Lee, 1997; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Min, 2005; Paulus, 1999; Zhao, 2010). For instance, Freeman (1995) found that peer feedback could improve students' awareness of their own work and enhance a deeper understanding of the language. In addition, it is easier for students to detect errors in peer-written essays than to detect errors in self-written essays (Lee, 1997). Peer feedback can especially benefit students' developmental processes in writing classes (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). Since reviewing peers' work requires students to implement revising tasks that include detecting errors in texts from readers' perspectives and recommending solutions to correct errors, students can become more independent and active (Rinehart & Chen, 2012) and ultimately improve their writing skills (Cho & MacArthur, 2011).

Although peer feedback provides a number of advantages, some researchers argue that it has limitations in the L2 classroom. For instance, the quality of feedback might be affected by limitations in students' knowledge, experience, and language abilities (Paulus, 1999; Rinehart & Chen, 2012; Saito & Fujita, 2004). Paulus' (1999) study revealed that the effects of

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