



Does language analytical ability mediate the effect of written feedback on grammatical accuracy in second language writing?



Natsuko Shintani ^{a,*}, Rod Ellis ^{a,b}

^a University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

^b Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that written corrective feedback helps to improve learners' grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing. However, little is known about how individual differences mediate the extent that learners benefit from feedback. This article reports a correlational study designed to examine whether one individual difference factor—language analytical ability (LAA)—mediated the extent to which 118 Japanese university students of English improved in their accurate use of the past hypothetical conditional and indefinite article in new writing depending on the type of feedback (direct feedback or metalinguistic explanation) and on whether they had an opportunity to revise. Three major findings emerged. First, learners with stronger LAA benefited more from both types of feedback than learners with weaker ability. Second, LAA played a larger role for those learners who had revised their original writing following the feedback. Third, the mediating effect was only evident in new writing produced shortly after the feedback (i.e., there was no long term effect). It is proposed that the extent that LAA was involved depended on a complex interaction involving type of feedback, opportunity to revise, and the target structure, which influenced the depth of processing the learners engaged in.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the study

Recent research has demonstrated that feedback on the grammatical errors that second language (L2) learners make in writing can lead to improved accuracy in new pieces of writing (e.g., Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Van Beuningen et al., 2012; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). However, to date, few studies have examined how individual difference factors such as language aptitude and motivation influence L2 writing (Kormos, 2012) and even fewer have investigated these factors in relation to the effect that feedback has on learners' grammatical accuracy in writing. The study reported below examines whether learner differences in one individual difference factor—language analytical ability (LAA)—mediated the extent to which adult foreign language learners manifested improvements in grammatical accuracy following different kinds of feedback on their writing.

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, Gate 3, 73 Epsom Ave, Epsom, Auckland 1023, New Zealand. Tel.: +64 9 623 8899. E-mail address: n.shintani@auckland.ac.nz (N. Shintani).

The study is premised on the assumption that the effects of feedback are mediated by both individual difference factors and contextual factors. These influence the extent to which individual learners attend to and process different types of feedback. As a result of differing levels of engagement, learning outcomes (e.g., improved accuracy in new writing) will vary. The study examined direct corrective feedback and metalinguistic explanation and, also whether the learners were required to just pay attention to the corrections or also to revise after receiving the feedback. We selected one individual difference factor—LAA—and measured its mediating role in learning outcomes.

1.2. Types of feedback

Feedback on writing can focus on organisation, content or linguistic form. We are concerned only with linguistic feedback, which comes in various forms (see Ellis, 2009). It can be focused or unfocused depending on whether it is directed at just one or two linguistic errors or a broad range of errors. It can be indirect or direct depending on whether the errors are just indicated or corrections provided. Learners can also receive metalinguistic clues or explanations of their errors.

Previous studies (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010) have shown that focused feedback is effective in the sense that it results in gains in grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing and, in some cases, is more effective than unfocused feedback (Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009). Both direct and indirect feedback have been found to be effective but Bitchener and Knoch (2010), Hashemnezhad and Mohammadnejad (2012) and Frear (2012) all reported direct feedback to be more effective than indirect. Fewer studies have investigated feedback consisting of metalinguistic explanations of errors and they have produced mixed results.¹ In two studies that investigated English articles, Shintani and Ellis (2013) reported that it was more effective than direct feedback while Sheen (2007) found the metalinguistic feedback combined with direct feedback was more effective than direct feedback by itself. However, Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki (2014) found direct feedback led to greater accuracy in the use of a complex grammatical structure (past hypothetical conditionals) than metalinguistic explanation by itself. However, the actual types of metalinguistic feedback differed in these studies. The studies motivated the decision to investigate both focused direct and metalinguistic feedback on different grammatical structures.

1.3. Revision following feedback

When learners are asked to revise their writing following feedback they have an opportunity to engage with the feedback. They can refer to the corrections they have been given or, in the case of metalinguistic explanations of their errors, can attempt to apply these to self-correcting their own errors. A number of studies (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Frear, 2012; Van Beuningen et al., 2012) have produced results that indicate that asking learners to revise immediately after they have received feedback is advantageous. However, it is also possible that feedback can be effective even if there is no opportunity to revise providing learners are required to process the corrections they have been given.

1.4. Language analytical ability and feedback

Language analytical ability is one of the abilities comprising language aptitude. Carroll's (1981) model of language aptitude includes both 'grammatical sensitivity' (i.e., the ability 'to recognize the grammatical functions of words or other linguistic entities in sentence structures' (p. 105)) and 'inductive learning ability' (i.e., the ability 'to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials, given sample language materials that permit such inferences' (p. 105)). However, the Modern Language Aptitude Test (Carroll & Sapon, 1959) did not distinguish these two aspects of LAA, leading Skehan (1998) to propose they can be combined into a single component, which he labelled 'language analytical ability'. The test in the study reported below measured language analytical ability using the same kind of test as in the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (Pimsleur, 1966).

There are a number of theoretical reasons for believing that LAA is a factor in learners' ability to benefit from and make use of feedback. The construct of LAA is closely related to the construct of explicit knowledge. Ellis (2004) defined the latter as 'knowledge about language and about the uses to which language can be put' (p. 229). Ellis considered LAA as 'the essential ability underlying the development of explicit knowledge' (p. 251) and cited a number of studies (e.g., Alderson, Steel, & Clapham, 1997) that have reported significant correlations between measures of language analytic ability and metalinguistic knowledge. Williams (2012) argued that written corrective feedback contributes primarily to explicit rather than implicit knowledge. Therefore, learners with stronger LAA may gain more from the feedback and be able to make better use of it when revising their writing or in new writing.

Kormos (2012) considered the role of language aptitude in relation to Kellogg's (1996) model of the writing process. This distinguishes three interactive processes: formulation (involving conceptualizing and organising content and translating this into words), execution (the creation of a handwritten or typed text) and monitoring (checking that the text expresses the writer's intention and making revisions where needed). Kormos proposed high aptitude learners were more likely to be

¹ One reviewer pointed out that metalinguistic explanation might not be construed as 'feedback'. However, while it is not 'corrective feedback' it clearly does constitute 'feedback' if learners receive the explanation after they have completed the writing and are required to use it to locate and correct their own errors.

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