



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Second Language Writing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jslw

Short Communication

Short communication on the missing dialogic aspect of an automated writing evaluation system in written feedback research

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Automated Writing Evaluation
Written Corrective Feedback
Dialogic Learning

ABSTRACT

Research on the efficacy of automated feedback systems in English writing has been on the rise over the past two decades. However, reaching a unanimous conclusion on the effectiveness of the systems in improving students' writing ability has been challenging due to variations in research designs, methodological issues, and heterogeneous contexts and participants. Criterion is one of these well-known systems that has been widely used and researched in English writing classes. Although researchers have encouraged creative integration of the system in the writing classroom, its application as writing tools has slightly differed in the studies to date. Drawing on the most recent implications of research on effective written corrective feedback, this critical short communication aims to draw the researchers' attention to an important but ignored aspect of AWE written corrective feedback in the fields of second language writing and language development: the role of active collaboration and participation of students through dialogue in dealing with written feedback in a digitalized social space. The paper concludes with recommendations for teachers and researchers as to how to use Criterion to provide coherent and cohesive feedback when it is integrated into classrooms and how to address the gap in research.

1. Introduction

This short communication is an outcome of a small aspect of a PhD project that investigated uptake and retention of resource-rich feedback context (RRFC) on academic writing for adult learners of English. RRFC in the study refers to various feedback resources which were available to the students, namely teacher, peer and Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE). My reflections on the application and usefulness of the AWE used in the study led me to share this short communication with L2 writing teachers and researchers, hoping that the reflections may contribute to pedagogy and research when technology is involved.

Pedagogically, integration of cutting-edge technology in the L2 classroom has proven to be supportive and facilitative of learners' L2 development (Ziegler & Mackey, 2017, pp. 89–90), and hence the topic merits attention. Ziegler and Mackey specifically highlight the usefulness of *interactional feedback* in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC), which can have 'numerous linguistic, pragmatic, affective and communicative benefits for L2 learners' (p. 90).

The following communication will draw on a series of notions related to written corrective feedback (WCF) to argue for innovative use of an AWE online system, Criterion, as a learning tool, with particular attention to a currently neglected feature. These notions include the most up-to-date directions for effective use of WCF in the L2 classroom (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Bitchener, 2017; Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013), interactional feedback in CALL (Ziegler & Mackey, 2017), and the importance of negotiated oral feedback over written feedback (Nassaji, 2017).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2018.05.004>

Received 18 October 2017; Received in revised form 7 May 2018; Accepted 13 May 2018
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2. Criterion, its features and use

Developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS), Criterion uses Natural-Language Processing (NLP) to provide instantaneous score reporting and diagnostic feedback on student text. It has two applications: E-rater gives a holistic score and Critique provides written computerized feedback in the form of description regarding discourse features and metalinguistic explanations on grammar, usage, mechanics, style, and organization of students' texts. When E-rater is in function, Criterion is being used as a testing tool, especially for high-stakes writing. In contrast, when diagnostic feedback is generated through Critique, Criterion is used as a learning tool. In this short communication, the latter is the primary focus of discussion.

The value of Criterion as a learning tool (diagnostic formative feedback) in the classroom has been evaluated in a number of studies (e.g. Attali, 2004; Chodorow, Gamon, & Tetreault, 2010; Chen & Cheng, 2008; Lavolette, Polio, & Kahng, 2015; Ranalli, Link, & Chukharev-Hudilainen, 2016). Even though such research reports only an approximate 80% precision rate in detecting surface-level linguistic errors (Lavolette et al., 2015; Ranalli et al., 2016), Lim and Kahng (2012) build a strong argument for its use in the classroom. Drawing on the results from empirical research, they report that the use of Criterion led to a significant decrease in the number of errors in learners' resubmissions, when compared with control groups. In addition, Criterion can encourage learners to write more drafts, help them with noticing their errors, and draw their attention to linguistic features by providing metalinguistic explanations.

Criterion's online resources such as the electronic handbook, *Writer's Handbook*, can help learners to check and correct their errors with the help of metalinguistic explanations and examples as well as available sample essays. These affordances, in turn, can promote learner autonomy, which is a valued goal in educational settings. In addition to the handbook, students can use the pre-writing feature to electronically plan their drafts (Heift & Hegelheimer, 2017; Shermis & Burstein, 2013), which can enhance learners' involvement in process writing. Criterion allows submission of multiple essays for each student account, and each essay can be revised and resubmitted 10 times. The other benefit of Criterion is that it generates a progress report through the succession of drafts. Learners can use these reports to monitor their L2 development and develop metacognitive knowledge about their cognitive processes. This feature of Criterion can function as a useful learning tool, helping learners to classify their errors and monitor their progress over time (Lim & Kahng, 2012, p. 43). The immediacy of feedback can be regarded as another benefit. From the perspective of interaction, usage-based and socio-cultural approaches to SLA, feedback needs to be immediate to be effective (Polio, 2012). Two studies (Hartshorn et al., 2010; Evans, Hartshorn, & Strong-Krause, 2011), when comparing immediate versus delayed feedback, both reported that timely feedback is important. Finally, the use of Criterion in the classroom is beneficial because teachers and peers can also provide feedback and insert their comments using *Comment* and *Dialogue Box* features. The *Comment* feature allows the reviewer to insert comments in the text, while the *Dialogue Box* opens up a chat box, in which the reviewer and the writer can interact and negotiate with each other. Despite its potential benefits for classroom use, it should also be noted that Criterion is not cheap to run. Institutions should decide whether integration of this online system into their writing program is sufficiently beneficial by taking into account their budget, effort and time they might be willing to allocate to it.

3. Issues with automated WCF in L2 development and L2 writing improvement

3.1. Automated WCF provides unfocused feedback

Focused WCF targets specific language errors, while unfocused WCF covers all errors located and addressed by the reviewer (Ferris et al., 2013, p. 309), where the reviewer can be a teacher, a researcher, a peer, or an AWE. While Bitchener and Storch (2016, p. 65) do not decisively conclude on the efficacy of focused WCF, previous studies have indeed found there is more value in the provision of focused WCF than unfocused WCF (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a,b; Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuijken, 2012; and restated and supported by Ferris et al. (2013)).

The value of focused feedback as opposed to comprehensive feedback can be further supported by some of the emerging patterns from WCF studies. Thus far, it has been suggested that rule-based and treatable form-focused simple errors respond more easily to WCF than item-based or complex rule-based form-focused errors (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Bitchener & Storch, 2016). This finding implies that adopting a selective approach in which only a few treatable errors are addressed at a time seems to be more beneficial for L2 students than comprehensive WCF.

Criterion's automated WCF is comprehensive and is provided to students' texts with no sensitivity as to whether the errors located are treatable or untreatable. Therefore, in the first place, Criterion's automated WCF may not be highly valuable for all L2 learners, especially for those whose linguistic competence is at a low level. Such learners will not be able to notice all their errors with understanding, whereas *noticing-with-understanding* is a necessity for uptake and L2 learning (Bitchener & Storch, 2016, p. 21).

3.2. Automated WCF lacks explicitness and rationale

In addition to the need for focused WCF, explicitness is also important. It has been reported that explicit WCF, which includes labelling, coding and/or providing metalinguistic explanations and grammatical descriptions can be particularly valuable for some L2 students, especially for those L2 learners with EFL grammar-based instruction backgrounds (Ferris et al., 2013, p. 309). As Ferris et al. state, explicit feedback can activate these L2 learners' prior knowledge gained in their previous learning experiences. Elsewhere, explicitness is defined as verification and elaboration which are counted as two necessary characteristics of effective formative feedback (Shute, 2008, p. 158). Verification refers to indication of the gap, while elaboration refers to the informational clues

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