Written Corrective Feedback: Focused and Unfocused

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Abstract—Finding the effects of Focused and Unfocused written corrective feedback is one of the commonest issues influencing the feedback methods currently in vogue. Broadly speaking, the way the instructors provide feedback is of great significance in terms of the improvement the students may make as a result of the supervision they are offered. This study tries to take a look at the major lines of research regarding the effects of focused and unfocused written corrective feedback as well as other studies which have focused on feedback provision in English as a foreign language context. The paper raises a number of questions the answers to which might pave the ground for further research on the nature of feedback and the potential effects they may have on the students' improvement.

Index Terms—focused feedback, unfocused feedback, writing ability

I. INTRODUCTION

The fact pertaining to the existence of various kinds of "written corrective feedback", with differing effects on the students' writing accuracy, fluency, proficiency, and ability as a whole, has received great attention on the part of second language writing researchers. There are several kinds of written corrective feedback which have proven to be of differing effects and caused various amounts of improvements in different areas of writing. Consequently, each and every single one of these feedback types is briefly reviewed first and then the studies carried out in each type are shortly discussed. Finally, this study raises a number of issues the investigation of which might prove to be of significance on the nature of feedback and/or the way its different types may function on the students' linguistic processing.

II. WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Writing has been described as an annoying activity by Widdowson (1978) and it has been told of as an activity which is preferred to be steered clear of as much as possible. This may probably reside in its complex nature. Writing, eventually, continues to be one of the most difficult areas for teachers and learners of foreign languages to deal with. As a matter of fact, as Ferris (2002) points out one of the significant distinguishing features between first and second language learners is the fact that non-native writers' errors are resultant from their inter-language related to their L1s and also to the lack of proficiency they have in their second language. Though L1 student writing is not completely error free, the errors made are different in quantity and nature. Because L2 students are simultaneously improving their writings are also involved in the process of L2 acquisition, extra support is required for them on the part of their writing instructors to make up for such deficiencies and devise strategies for finding, correcting, and avoiding errors. In fact, it is generally believed that when writing strategies are acquired in L1, the strategies are transferred to L2, and it is assumed that L2 writing ability is not determined simply by becoming "more proficient in the linguistic code of the new language" (Jones, 1985, p.96; cited in Raimes, 2006). Cumming (1988) believes that writing performance in a second language is influenced both by mother tongue writing expertise and by proficiency in the second language (cited in Wong, 1994).

However, undoubtedly, it goes back a long way with any language program. As Raimes (1983) argues the need to communicate is not the main reason why writing is an inseparable element in such a program and he also holds that writing helps the learners learn at least in three different ways. The First one is in the sense that the new grammar and vocabulary that have recently been taught by the instructor are practiced and reinforced through writing. In the second place, writing contributes to students getting more adventurous with language and going beyond the boundaries of what they already know. Thirdly, with the application of writing, learners are given the chance to unearth new methods of sharing their thoughts when they are attempting to jot down their ideas. Trying to make improvements in teachers' and learners' attitude toward foreign language writing, therefore, is to be considered as a major goal of research in the field.

III. WRITING ASSESSMENT AND RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' WRITING

It may seem strange to some people to consider assessment as separate from teaching. It is apparent that assessment is part of teaching (Gannon, 1985, p-11). Hyland (1996) believes that teachers often regard assessment as an unwelcome task with the potential to undermine the relationship they have created with their students and the confidence students have gained in their writing (P.212). But in fact evaluating student performance is a crucial aspect of teaching and it is considered as a formative process closely related to the planning, design, and teaching strategies. It is worth noting that evaluative feedback contributes greatly to the learning of individual students and to the development of an effective and responsive writing course. In fact, assessment refers to the variety of ways used to collect information on a learner's language ability or achievement. Assessing is one thing and responding to student errors is yet another thing. Some teachers assess students' writing to get to know how they have taught and they may provide the students with the scores they have gotten. Some other instructors may, preferably, offer feedback to their students.

As it has always been seen, there has always been some confusion about whether the instructors ought to mark student errors at all. Process writing fans have asserted that too much focus on the errors students make might result in the students' inefficient writing and thinking process, which turns writing into a kind of dull practice of forms and not a path to illuminate meaning (Zamel 1982, 1985). One strategy, in fact, to consider writing accurately is to take into account the errors made by the writers. As a matter of fact, "Error treatment is one of the key second language writing issues faced by classroom teachers, teacher trainers, and teacher researchers" (Ferris, 2002). Errors have, in fact, been viewed differently for an excessively long time. "Because of the influence of behavioral psychology and structural linguistics on second language teaching, teachers gave a great deal of attention to students' accuracy or lack thereof, constantly correcting all errors so that no bad habits would form" (Ferris, 2002). Teachers also taught students grammatical forms and rules assumed to be problematic because of contrasts with students' native languages. Error correction and grammar instruction were, as a result, considered the most important components of writing instruction.

According to the followers of Skinner, errors are evil signs and should be totally avoided. They firmly believe that as soon as an error occurs, it should be entirely corrected. This way, teachers who follow behaviorist perspectives tend to focus on form-focused instruction. In this method, students, instead of learning how to communicate in the second language, learn some explicit rules. In fact, Sanz & Morgan-Short (2004) argued that students learn rules or explicit information in the form of grammatical explanation or corrective feedback (as cited in Ostovar Namaghi, 2010, p-5). In this way, students become grammatically competent but communicatively incompetent.

Conversely, in a cognitive view towards errors, Chomsky (1959) and his followers believe that errors are signs of learning; they shouldn't be avoided at all. According to Corder (1967), errors provide evidence of progress. Krashen and Terrell (1983) did not approve of correcting errors due to the fact that as they put forth correction was of no significance in a natural approach. These insights were transferred into SLA theory in the 1980's predominantly through the work of Stephen Krashen who argued that competence in a second language was acquired implicitly, only through comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). In both behaviorist and cognitive theories of L2 learning, feedback is seen as contributing to language learning. In both structural and communicative approaches to language teaching, feedback is viewed as a means of fostering learner motivation and ensuring linguistic accuracy (Ellis, 2009).

In fact, in terms of second language acquisition, it must be noted that it is unrealistic to expect L2 writers to write natively without errors. On the other hand, due to the fact that SLA takes a lot of time, the students are not supposed to improve overnight. Besides, L2 writers need direct instruction and focus on different linguistic issues, feedback on the errors they make, and instruction related to their linguistic shortcomings and their needs to improve learning strategies. (Ferris, 2002)

In order to find a practical solution for such a matter, an integrated approach was suggested by Long (1977) in which Communicative Language Teaching was not merely focusing on forms but it was predominantly related to form. One method for achieving an integrated approach is to provide error correction while learners are using the language to communicate.

IV. To Give or Not to Give Feedback

The advent of the process approach in L1 and L2 writing instruction in the 1970s and 1980s led to a decreased focus on student errors. Since then, a number of scholars have questioned the appropriateness of this trend, some conservatively noting that L2 writers may be distinct enough from L2 writers to merit different pedagogical strategies (e.g., Leki 1990; Nelson and Carson 1998; Silva 1993; Zhang 1995; as cited in Ferris, 2002).

Truscott(1999) argues that there is no convincing research evidence that error correction ever helps student writers, as error correction as typically practiced overlooks SLA insights about how different aspects of language are acquired, and that practical problems related to teachers' and students' ability and willingness to give and receive error correction may differ. He concludes that error correction is not only useless to student writers but that it is actually harmful in that it diverts time and energy away from more productive aspects of writing instruction. Ferris (1999), in his own response to Truscott argues that his conclusions are premature, primarily because the body of research evidence he cites is inadequate and inconsistent in its methodology and subject characteristics, and that further research on error correction is necessary before final recommendations can be made to ESL writing teachers. While it may be fair to say that "those who claim editing instruction or corrective feedback is useful have the burden of demonstrating such effectiveness"

(Polio, Fleck, and Leder, 1998), there are nonetheless several compelling reasons for teachers not only to continue the practice of giving error feedback and providing editing-strategy training but to seek ways to improve the effectiveness of these practices (as cited in Ferris, 2002).

The first reason is that some works of research (Fathman and Whalley 1990; Ferris 1997; Lalande1982) have proved that written correction may contribute to the learners' development in a short period of time. In a recently completed study (Ferris et al. 2000), it was revealed that 92 second language writers, having received their teachers' feedback, managed to correct the errors they had committed. Truscott (1996) and Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998) correctly point out that there is little evidence that error feedback helps students improve their accuracy over the long term and that if students do show improvement, this may probably be attributed to other factors such as additional writing practice and exposure to the L2. Indeed, it is challenging to measure long-term improvement in students' written accuracy and to attribute such development, if any, mainly to teacher feedback. Nonetheless, it undoubtedly may be argued that long-term development is unlikely without observable short term improvement, at least in the ability to attend to and correct errors when pointed out by teachers. Thus, this small but booming research line, while it does not answer all theoretical questions related to error correction, should not be overlooked.

In the second place, as some researchers point out, students consider their teachers' feedback on their errors as important and think that it contributes to their writing development (Cohen 1987; Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990; Ferriset al. 2000; Ferris and Roberts 2001; Leki 1991; Radecki and Swales 1988). Truscott (1996) considers this argument and responds that "students believe in correction…but that does not mean that teachers should give it to them" and that teachers should, rather than giving into this student desire, help students find solutions for the absence of grammar correction.

Finally language writing teachers ought to dig deep some strategies contributing the learners to grow independent (Ferris 1995). It can be because accuracy is important in the real world to which student writers go. Both anecdotal and research evidence suggests that at least in some settings, university professors and employers find ESL errors distracting and stigmatizing (Hendrickson 1980; Janopolous 1992; Santos 1988; Scarcella 1996; Vann, Lorenz, and Meyer 1991).

Student writers' lexical, morphological, and syntactic accuracy is important because a lack of accuracy may both interfere with the comprehensibility of their message and mark them as inadequate users of the language. Writing instructors surely have some responsibility to arm their students with the knowledge, strategies and recourses they will need to function effectively outside of the ESL writing classroom. Though research may still be inconclusive as to the best ways to accomplish these goals, it seems clear that if L2 writing teachers do not take the responsibility, students are not likely to develop their editing skills and general accuracy.

In fact, while it is crucial to admit that the research database on error correction is not comprehensive yet and that researchers have drawn oppositions to error correction in EFL, most teachers still assume that error correction, grammar instruction, and editing-strategy training to are helpful to improve the students' writing ability.

As it was mentioned earlier, there is disagreement among the scholars on the necessity and usefulness of teacher feedback. As cited in Ferris (2002), Corder 1971; Ferris 1999, James 1998, Reid 1998, & Truscott 1996, take issue with the matter that whether feedback and formal instruction can result in the students' improvement in written accuracy over time. Ferris (2002) points out that based on the adequacy of teacher feedback, it is necessary to address a charge that has been leveled by several researchers and reviewers: that a major reason why studies have failed to show positive effects for error correction on student accuracy is that the feedback given by teachers is incomplete, idiosyncratic, erratic, and inaccurate (Cohen and Cavalcati 1990; Cohen and Robbins 1976; Truscott 1996; Zamel 1985).

V. DIFFERENT KINDS OF WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Having come up with the fact that error correction is highly effective; researchers have focused on different kinds of feedback. There are various ways through which teachers can provide their students with feedback. Ferris (2002) has pointed out that a number of researchers over the past years have investigated the influences error correction may prove to have on the students' accuracy development (Ferris 1995, 1997; Polio, Fleck, and Leder, 1998).

A. Positive or Negative Feedback

Ellis (2009) divides feedback into two major categories: positive or negative. Positive feedback approves that a learner response to an activity is correct. It may signal the correctness of the content of a learner utterance or the linguistic veracity of the utterance. In pedagogical theory positive feedback is viewed as essential since it provides affective support to the learner and fosters motivation to continue learning. In SLA, on the contrary, positive feedback has received little attention, in part because discourse analytical studies of classroom interaction have shown that the teacher's positive feedback is frequently ambiguous since sometimes the teacher's approval of what the student has said does not necessarily mean they are correct. It may sometimes be followed by the paraphrase of what the student has uttered. Negative feedback signals, in one way or another, that the learner's utterance is not correct or is linguistically deviant. In other words, it is corrective in intent. Both SLA researchers and language educators have paid careful attention to corrective feedback (CF), but they have frequently disagreed about whether to correct errors, what errors to correct, how to correct them, and when to correct them (e.g. Hendrickson, 1978 and Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Corrective feedback constitutes one type of negative feedback. It takes the form of a response to a learner utterance

containing a linguistic error. The response is another initiated repair which may contain (a) a sign that an error was made, (b) the correct form of what has been made, (c) metalinguistic data on why something is to be used or even a mixture of some of the cases (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). CF episodes are comprised of a trigger, the feedback move, and (optionally) uptake, as in this example of a CF episode from Ellis and Sheen (2006), where the teacher first seeks clarification of a student's utterance containing an error and then recasts it, resulting in a second student up taking the correction.

B. Recasts, Elicitation, Meta Linguistic Feedback

One of the methods is the use of recasts. Recasting is defined as the instructor's rephrasing of a part or the whole of what the learner has uttered, without the erroneous part (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; as stated in Reiko Mori, 2011, p-3). Recasting, according to Lightbown and Spada (2006), is, actually, to correctly paraphrase a student's incorrect utterance while maintaining the central meaning of the utterance. Another error correction method which has considerably drawn attention is elicitation. This way, the teacher does not simply provide the student with the correct form but rather tries to have the student self-correct. Another type of feedback, yet, is to provide the students with meta-linguistic information concerning the error; e.g. to provide the student with extra information about the error. Bitchener (2005) and Sheen (2007) came up with this conclusion that meta-linguistic elaboration is superior to direct feedback.

C. Direct and Indirect Written Corrective Feedback

Most frequently, the studies on feedback, in a broader sense, have put corrective feedback in two major groups; namely' direct and indirect. Direct CF is the one supplying the correct form of the erroneous part somewhere close to the error. This kind can also include the deleting of an excessive part, the provision of a necessary section, and the insertion of the exact form. Bitchener (2010) puts it this way that lately, direct corrective feedback has also embraces some elaborations or even oral demystifications. Indirect Corrective feedback, conversely, is what in a way shows an error has been committed. This kind does not contain explicit elaborations, however. It may consist of signaling an error or even writing the number thereof. This way, instead of giving the student the correct form, the students are supposed to solve the error which was implicitly mentioned. Experts in the field of English as a second language strongly hold that since indirect kind of feedback leads the students to working on the problems on their own and also assures a more lengthened acquisition, it is more desirable(Reid,1998; as cited in Ferris, 2001). Hendrickson (1980) advocates a combination of direct and indirect error correction. Any way each kind of method has had its own pros and cons. Followers of indirect method believe that it is useful since it engages the students in a problem solving situation and activates them to think deeply about the error. Supporters of the direct method, on the other hand, believe that through direct feedback students are not confused. They, furthermore, argue that direct feedback is more immediate; it's also more explicit and helps the students apply the same rule for the problems similar to the one on which they are provided with feedback.

Based on Bitchener (2010), research works that have examined the comparative advantages of various kinds of feedback have mainly focused on the following classifications (1) direct and indirect types of feedback; (2) different types of indirect feedback; and (3) different types of direct feedback. As for the first type, the ones that investigated direct and indirect kinds of feedback, Lalande, 1982 (cited in Bitchener, 2010, Young & Cameron, 2005) reported an advantage for indirect feedback; Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) and Semke (1984) reported no difference between the two approaches; and Chandler (2003) reported positive evidence for both direct and indirect feedback (Bitchener, 2010). Due to the restrictions in terms of the procedure and processing of these research works and the inherent dissimilarities among the students, it is not really possible to examine the accuracy level of the claims. Studies by Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Robb (1986) investigated the relative effectiveness of different types of indirect feedback and found no difference between the different types (Bitchener, 2010).The implementation of indirect kind of feedback, on the other hand, needs further inquiry into the way different constructs have been operated and put into examination in these research works.

Manifold studies, on the other hand, have investigated the influence of various kinds of direct written CF on students' accuracy development. Bitchener et.al., (2005) compared the effect of direct feedback combinations mostly implemented on advanced level students: (1) direct error correction (above each error) plus oral meta-linguistic explanation in the form of 5 minute one-on-one conferences; (2) direct error correction; and (3) no corrective feedback (Bitchener, 2010). They came up with the fact that students receiving direct CF and oral elaborations did better than second and third groups in terms of the definite article and simple past tense but did not find such a fact in terms of prepositions. The researchers argued that it might have been the use of oral meta-linguistic feedback which has eventually resulted in higher accuracy. It is also worth pointing out that in a study conducted by Ferris et al., 2000, it has been proven that writers managed to correct eighty percent of their errors which were provided by feedback. Ferris (1997), also believed that written feedback in the form of elaborations together with signaling the error in the target text resulted in prosperous correction of errors (Ferris& Barrie, 2001).

D. Focused and Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback

Conversely, a basic disapproval of Truscott's (1996) in terms of feedback provision was concerned with the fact that various classifications of errors are treated equally by teachers though they are actually supposed to be treated

differently since the processes of their acquisition are totally variant. This claim is also substantiated by the results of other previously done research works in this regard. Chaney, 1999; Ferris, 1995; Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris and Helt, 2000; Frantzen & Rissell, 1987; Lalande, 1982; Sheppard, 1992(as cited in D. Ferris, B. Roberts, 2001, p-166) believe that different types of errors should not be treated similarly.

Owing to the fact that different types of errors should be treated differently, more recently, researchers have moved away from broad correction of every error (what is termed "comprehensive" error correction) and turned their attention to focused correction of error, in particular mistakes in the use of definite and indefinite articles. In most of the cases, having provided feedback on special groups of errors, the teachers caused more triumphant student developments (Ferris, 2001). They pointed out that where the error correction is not focused, but comprehensive, it is likely that students will have to receive a considerable amount of correction on a large piece of writing and will not be able to check all their errors. A study carried out by Karimi and Fotovatnia (2010) has revealed that written corrective feedback is of broad pedagogical value, and focused CF and Unfocused CF can equally contribute to the grammatical accuracy in L2 writing. Another study conducted by Farrokhi (2011) proved focused CF as more effective on the students' improved grammatical accuracy than unfocused CF in terms of pedagogy.

In a study carried out by Frear (2010), having compared the differential effects focused direct Corrective feedback on the students' use of past tense to unfocused direct Corrective feedback and another group receiving no feedback, the researcher proved that no difference existed among the three groups. It was found, anyway, that the experimental groups did better than the group receiving no feedback in terms of their performance on second writing.

Rouhi & Samiei (2010) also conducted a research on the effectiveness of focused and unfocused indirect feedback on the use of simple past tense in L2 writing. There were three groups of students, focused group, unfocused group, and control group. Carrying out the research, the researchers came up with no statistically significant difference among the three groups.

In another study conducted by Farrokhi & Sattarpour (2012), the researchers had attempted to find the answer to the following questions: whether direct written corrective feedback (CF) can help high-proficient L2 learners, who have already achieved a rather high level of accuracy in English, improve in the accurate use of two functions of English articles (the use of 'a' for first mention and 'the' for subsequent or anaphoric mentions); and (2) whether there are any differential effects in providing the two different types of direct written CF (focused and unfocused) on the accurate use of these grammatical forms by these EFL learners. There were two experimental groups, i.e. focused and unfocused. After having done the experiment, the statistical analyses indicated that both experimental groups did better than the control group in the post-test, and moreover, focused group significantly outperformed unfocused one in terms of accurate use of definite and indefinite English articles. Overall, these results suggest that focused written CF was more effective than unfocused one; at least where English articles are concerned, in improving grammatical accuracy of high-proficient L2 writers and thus strengthens the case for teachers providing focused written CF.

VI. Conclusion

Putting aside different kinds of feedback, we come to student preferences towards feedback. In research works directed on writing in a second language, rather than teaching writing teachers how to teach, more focus was concentrated on the learners of writing. In English as a Foreign language cases, though training the writing teachers has been particularly ignored, more attention has been directed to providing the students with strategies to write efficiently and deal with the demanding task of writing (Lee, 2010). In fact L2 writing teachers are supposed to be totally trained with regard to feedback provision. As Ferris, 1995; Ferris et al., 2000; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Komura, 1999; Leki, 1991; Roberts, 1999 point out L2 student writers want, expect, and value teacher feedback on their written errors. Students are mainly treated as the only receivers while they should actually be actively involved in the CF provision procedures (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, as cited in Lee, 2008). As for the influence of error feedback on student revision, it has been generally proven that students have succeeded in generating more accurate revisions in response to the feedback they are provided with (Ferris, 2002, p. 15). "Few studies of error correction have examined this issue directly by looking at preliminary student drafts and teacher feedback and then tracing the changes potentially attributable to that feedback in subsequent student writing." (Ferris, 2002) In fact, their reaction as well as their preference should be taken into account. So, a growing body of research is called for to investigate the way psychological issues matter with regard to the way students respond to the feedbacks provided by their teachers. On the other hand, few studies have actually investigated the use of different kinds of focused feedback by tracing the students' previous drafts as well as their teachers' feedback and their final piece of writing. Needs for further research targeting different kinds of feedback and their effect on the students' final written proficiency are completely evident.

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