



Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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SSLT 6 (4). 2016. 717-723

doi: 10.14746/sslit.2016.6.4.8

<http://www.sslit.amu.edu.pl>

Book Review

Written corrective feedback for L2 development

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Publisher:

Multilingual Matters, 2016

ISBN:

9781783095032

Pages:

156

The book *Written Corrective Feedback for L2 Development* represents a state-of-the-art overview of critical issues involved in the provision of corrective feedback (CF) on linguistic errors that learners of additional languages (i.e., foreign, second or otherwise) commit in their efforts to compose texts in the target language. These issues are tackled from both a psycholinguistic and sociocultural perspective in recognition of the fact that it is the two theoretical stances that have provided the main impetus for empirical investigations in this important domain. As the authors point out in the concluding chapter,

... our main aim in writing this book was to provide an overview of the theories of L2 learning within the cognitive and sociocultural perspectives and consider to what extent they explain a role for written CF in L2 learning process, as well as the possible explanations for why written CF may or may not lead to successful L2 development. (p. 120)

It should be made clear from the outset that such a goal is without doubt worth pursuing for the reason that, first, there has long been a demand for a book-

length publication that would bring together and critically examine the available research on written CF with a view to setting an agenda for future empirical endeavors, and, second, as is emphasized on numerous occasions throughout the volume, there has also been a pressing need to situate the accumulating empirical evidence within a specific theoretical framework in order to accommodate the well-known processes of second language acquisition. This is clearly a worthwhile undertaking that aims to accomplish for written error correction what has already been attained for oral CF (e.g., Mackey, 2014; Nassaji, 2015; Pawlak, 2014), that is, offering a theoretically-sound account of its role in gaining mastery over an additional language by demonstrating how it can impact upon different stages of L2 development and shedding light on factors influencing its effectiveness or lack thereof. It should be emphasized here that John Bitchener and Neomy Storch have not only succeeded in attaining these key aims but have in fact also done a superb job of synthesizing, analyzing and criticizing the existing studies, tying up many of the loose ends and outlining the directions for the research endeavors to come.

The book has been neatly divided into six chapters, leading the reader from the discussion of preliminary issues connected with written CF, through the presentation of the two theoretical stances and the critical analysis of the empirical evidence that the research they have inspired has yielded, to the consideration of issues that empirical investigations of written CF should tackle and the methodological challenges they are bound to face. More specifically, Chapter One, intended as an introduction, is devoted to a precise explanation of key terms included in the title, that is *written CF* and *L2 development*, the presentation of the case for the beneficial role of written error correction and the description of the structure of the book. The next two chapters represent a cognitive perspective on the contribution of written CF to the development of an additional language. Chapter Two demonstrates how written CF can spur L2 development by discussing the crucial distinction between explicit and implicit L2 knowledge, illustrating the ways in which the former can convert into the latter, as postulated by skill-learning theories (Anderson, 1993; DeKeyser, 2007; McLaughlin, 1990), and, most importantly, considering the potential contribution of different written CF options to different stages of cognitive processing of input hypothesized by Gass (1997) (i.e., attention, noticing, comprehended input, intake and integration). Chapter Three, in turn, offers a synthesis of the empirical studies that have been informed by the psycholinguistic approach, with the sections included being devoted to the role of CF in facilitating L2 development (i.e., both with respect to revisions and producing new texts), the efficacy of different types of written CF (e.g., direct correction vs. less explicit types of written CF), the benefits of written feedback as a function of error type (e.g.,

rule-based vs. item-based forms), the value of focused and unfocused written CF (i.e., such that is limited to certain categories of errors vs. such that is comprehensive), as well as the moderating effects of individual and contextual variables (e.g., various dimensions of language aptitude, working memory, attitudes, setting). The foci of Chapters Four and Five are similar, the key difference lying in the fact that they view the role of written CF from a sociocultural stance. The former outlines the tenets of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), and its extension in the form of activity theory (Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 2001), demonstrating how their constitutive constructs, such as the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, mediation, subjects, actions or community can be applied to teasing out the contribution of written CF to L2 development. The latter offers an overview or research falling within this theoretical stance or can at least be interpreted with its assistance, focusing on the effects of feedback as a form of scaffolding, the use of symbolic (e.g., language) and material (e.g., the computer) tools by means of which written CF mediates L2 development, and the role of feedback as an activity, understood in terms of learners' response to written CF supplied by teachers, teachers' practices regarding the provision of CF, and the occurrence of peer feedback as well as the response to such feedback. Finally, Chapter Six, serving as a conclusion, briefly summarizes all the themes taken up in the book and singles out the lines of inquiry that empirical studies drawing on both the cognitive and sociocultural perspective might pursue in the near future.

Apart from what has been said above about the pressing need for a volume of this kind and for an attempt to situate the use of written CF within a theoretical framework, both of which tasks the authors have not only achieved but clearly have done so with flying colors, there are other things for which they should be commended. First, the publication draws our attention to the benefits of written CF that may often be overlooked by specialists and practitioners alike, such as its permanence, which enables learners to consult and revisit the corrections at the time of their choosing, diminished demands on limited attention resources, which facilitates cognitive comparisons, as well as the fact that such feedback can therefore be more effective than oral CF, at least when it comes to the development of explicit knowledge. Second, the book imposes the so-much-needed order on the somewhat fragmented research on written correction, highlighting the areas that have thus far been addressed and issues in urgent need of empirical investigation, in particular those shedding light on *why* written CF is or is not effective in different contexts and for different individuals. Third, truly commendable is the attention given to the contribution of various mediating variables, both individual, linguistic and contextual in nature, which can not only in many cases trump the effects of specific types of written CF, but can in

fact enter into intricate, unpredictable interactions with these feedback moves as well as with each other, a reality that has often been overlooked in research on instructed second language acquisition in its entirety. Fourth, the synthesis of the existing studies is not only comprehensive, including also lower-key known publications, but also critical, providing a convincing rationale for why some studies offer more compelling empirical evidence than others. Finally, it is laudable that the authors have chosen to ground research into written feedback in two, seemingly disparate, theoretical stances and that they are cognizant of the fact that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive but can in fact inform each other, although this realization was not present from the start. As they candidly state, “we began . . . , by presenting the two major theoretical paradigms, cognitive and sociocultural . . . However, in the process of writing the book, we realized that the two paradigms may, in fact, provide complementary insights on written CF . . .” (p. 135). While, as will be elaborated upon below, integration of this kind could be taken a step further, the admission that the two perspectives are two sides of the same coin can hardly be underestimated.

Even though the book constitutes an excellent and much-needed account of the role of written CF in L2 development, there are usually some issues in any publication that might make one wish for more, and the volume is no exception to this rule. For one thing, the discussion of the distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge in Section 2.1. is somewhat simplistic as it does not recognize the fact that the development of fully implicit knowledge may be an unachievable goal for most adult learners in foreign language contexts and that it is therefore better to talk about highly automatized explicit knowledge which can effortlessly be employed in spontaneous communication (DeKeyser, 2010; Pawlak, 2013). I do understand that a focus on such minute distinctions might have been beyond the scope of the book, but had this caveat been recognized, the discussion of the problems involved in the measurement of implicit knowledge in Section 6.2.1.2. might have become superfluous as the issue would boil down to designing tasks in which the targeted form has to be deployed in real time, regardless of whether this is possible thanks to implicit or highly automatized explicit knowledge. Secondly, many specialists would in all likelihood take issue with the statement that “it is generally agreed that (1) the goal of L2 learning is the acquisition of native or near-native competence in both understanding and producing/using the target language . . .” (p. 11), pointing, for example, to the growing role of English as an international language in which native-speaker proficiency may or even should not be seen as a priority (cf. McKay, 2011). While I am personally against total abandonment of native-speaker norms as a point of reference for a number of reasons, it is clear that the goal of L2 learning hinges on the agendas of a particular learner or a given group of learners and this goal

may in many situations not be native-like proficiency, a fact that should at the very least have been acknowledged. Third, what I found missing in the discussion of the mediating role of individual and contextual factors was the consideration of the potential impact of variables that have not so far been investigated with respect to written CF, such as learning styles, learning strategies, more specific conceptualizations of motivation (e.g., the ideal language self) or even willingness to communicate. I am fully aware that no research of this kind exists, but considering the ways in which new territories could be staked out in this respect would be extremely useful. Fifth, I wish that in their discussion of learner attitudes, beliefs, motivations or agency in regard to response to written CF, the authors had made a reference to the concept of engagement with corrective feedback, in particular of the cognitive and affective type, that Ellis (2010) discusses with respect to both oral and written correction, as this concept surely helps us better understand the varying effects of diverse corrective moves in different situations. Finally, although I heaped much praise on the authors for their recognition of the complementarity of the psycholinguistic and sociocultural stances, I think that it is warranted to emphasize that the findings of the studies conducted within the two approaches should not only reinforce each other, as if from a distance, but that the two paradigms can also be combined within a single study. This could happen, for example, when a pretest-posttest design including experimental and control groups as well as exploring the mediating effects of individual factors were augmented with data derived from other sources (e.g., interviews, think-aloud protocols, stimulated recall), thus helping us more fully understand the value of different corrective moves and their contribution at different stages of cognitive input processing.

What should be clearly stressed at this juncture is that the points raised above should not be viewed as criticisms, but, rather, as indications of the ways in which the authors could have delved a little more into certain issues, offered important caveats or considered additional ways in which the role of written CF in L2 development could be examined. As such, these comments do not in the least diminish the immense contribution of the volume to the field, a contribution that is truly difficult to overestimate. As signaled on several occasions throughout the review, John Bitchener and Neomy Storch have done an outstanding job of situating written feedback within two dominant theoretical frameworks, demonstrating that the cognitive and sociocultural approaches are complementary rather than competing with each other, offering a thorough but at the same time critical synthesis of exiting studies and, most importantly perhaps, charting the course for future research on written CF, emphasizing the necessity of illuminating *how* and *why* it promotes L2 development or fails to do so under certain circumstances. For these reasons, I am confident that the book

will offer food for thought to researchers interested in written error correction, spawn many further empirical investigations in this pedagogically important area and provide in effect valuable insights into the mechanisms determining the efficacy of written CF, the variables moderating these mechanisms and the diverse interactions between them.

Reviewed by

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