

# Theoretical perspectives on the language learning potential of written corrective feedback

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## Abstract

This paper aims at analysing and describing the different theoretical perspectives that can be found in terms of the influence that WCF has on learning a foreign language. These theories deal with not only with the role that WCF plays when learning a language, but also when acquiring it. In consequence, this paper will deal with four main theories, which are Krashen's Monitor Model, skill acquisition, interaction, and socio-cultural theories.

**Keywords:** Written corrective feedback, direct, indirect, learning, acquisition

**Título:** Perspectivas teóricas sobre el potencial de la corrección de textos escritos a la hora de aprender un idioma.

## Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar y describir las diferentes perspectivas teóricas que se encuentran disponibles por lo que respecta a la influencia que la corrección de textos escritos tiene a la hora de aprender un idioma extranjero. Estas teorías abarcan no solo el papel que la corrección de textos escritos tiene sobre el aprendizaje de una lengua, sino también a la hora de adquirirla. Por consiguiente, este artículo abarcará cuatro teorías principales, las cuales son la teoría modelo de Krashen, las teorías sobre la adquisición de habilidad, interacción, y la teoría socio-cultural.

**Palabras clave:** Corrección de textos escritos, directa, indirecta, aprendizaje, adquisición.

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## INTRODUCCIÓN Y JUSTIFICACIÓN

Information regarding the different theoretical perspectives on the language learning potential of WCF will be studied in this section. To this end, it is crucial to examine the degree of influence that different theories have over L2 learning and acquisition. In this way, this paper will delve into four relevant theories dealing with the effects that WCF has on language learning and acquisition. These theories are Krashen's Monitor Model, skill acquisition, interaction, and socio-cultural theories.

In order to understand what these perspectives intend to transmit, we should contextualise this information and describe what feedback and error correction mean. Consequently, we find several authors referring to WCF in different ways. Chaudron (1998) characterises WCF as the response that teachers give students to inform them that they have committed an error. He also affirms that this response has to be made explicit in order to focus learners' attention on the errors to correct them. The main objective of WCF will be to help students not to make those errors again.

According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), corrective feedback is described as "an indication to the learners that his or her use of the target language is incorrect" (p. 172). These authors assert that the reactions of CF can be implicit or explicit and also that they can contain further metalinguistic information. Another author, Li (2010), claims that "corrective feedback in SLA refers to the responses to a learner's non-target like L2 production" (p. 309).

## MARCO TEÓRICO Y CONCEPTUAL

Krashen's Monitor Model, it is composed of five hypotheses, each of which is related to the potential that WCF has to foster language learning and acquisition. Starting with the first one, the Acquisition-learning Hypothesis, Krashen makes a clear distinction between both concepts. He asserts that "acquisition" occurs only when students interact in natural and meaningful communication. Nevertheless, "learning" would happen as a consequence of classroom teaching and exercises in which students' attention is centred on form, as happens when WCF is given to them. Thus, we could compare

"acquisition" with implicit knowledge and "learning" with explicit knowledge. According to this hypothesis, WCF would not contribute to the students' development of their acquired knowledge (Bitchener, 2012: 349-350).

However, the situation changes with his second hypotheses, the Monitor Hypothesis, in which he leaves scope for learning and explicit CF. However, students will be able to make use of their explicit knowledge in order to respond to WCF just if they aim at achieving accuracy and if their linguistic knowledge is adequate (McLaughlin, 1987). On the other hand, the Natural Order Hypothesis affirms that learners acquire new knowledge in a regular order, and that the sequence in which they are taught in class cannot alter this fixed order. In this way, Krashen suggests that CF and form-focused teaching do not show any acquisitional advantages (Bitchener, 2012: 350).

Added to this, we find the Input Hypothesis, in which Krashen states that for L2 acquisition to happen, learners only need to be exposed to comprehensible input. Finally, according to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, it is said that if students present a strong affective filter, it is improbable that they assimilate any kind of input they receive, whether positive or negative feedback. In accordance with these hypotheses, it is made explicit that Krashen does not consider WCF to have any benefits for the acquisition of new knowledge. However, he recognises that CF and teaching can help students achieve explicit knowledge. The reason for this is that he separates "learning" from "acquisition", so he does not consider the possibility of transforming explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge (Bitchener, 2012: 350).

Turning to skill acquisition theories, the models elaborated by Anderson (1985) and McLaughlin (1990) deal with the learning of skills generally, including language learning. The proficiency of simple processes results in processes leading to complex behaviour. Thus, McLaughlin (1987), states that L2 learning requires the attainment of a cognitive ability: "Learning is a cognitive process... there is constant restructuring as learners simplify, unify and gain increasing control over their internal representation... -automatization and restructuring- are central to cognitive theory" (pp. 133-134).

Added to the above, the skill acquisition theory asserts that we can manipulate information making use of our explicit or implicit knowledge, that is to say, in a controlled or automatic way. In fact, this theory states that learning entails a movement from controlled to automatic handling. All this makes clear that we can find learning in the controlled phase and that this can be internalised and be carried out automatically through practice and repeated activation. To sum up, this theory is in favour of the fact that explicit knowledge and learning obtained from instruction and WCF can become implicit for the purpose of acquisition to be achieved (Bitchener, 2012: 350).

In this line, Anderson (1985) with his Adaptive Control of Thought model addresses explicit and implicit knowledge as declarative and procedural knowledge, respectively. Apart from that, he strongly believes that declarative knowledge can be transformed into procedural knowledge with lot of practice, which would result in automatization. These facts have also been investigated by authors such as DeKeyser and N. Ellis. DeKeyser (1997) demonstrated that through extended consistent practice, explicit or declarative knowledge of L2 grammar rules can become automatized. On the other hand, Ellis (2011) holds that getting back and using explicit knowledge can lead to the improvement of the L2 although not directly.

Interaction theories are the ones that offer more information about the role that CF plays in L2 learning and acquisition. These theories focus on the importance of input, output and feedback when analysing how L2 learning works. We can find positive or negative input, that is to say, input about the correct form to use or about what is not considered adequate in the L2, respectively. As opposed to Krashen, these theories affirm that learning cannot occur just by exposing learners to L2 input. Quite the contrary, learners need to elaborate some kind of modified output for learning to take place (Long, 1996).

Taking the above mentioned factors into consideration, it is clear that CF has a fundamental role in interaction theories. According to Swain & Lapkin (1998), explicit teaching of linguistic forms, such as CF, has been demonstrated to be beneficial in content-based and immersion learning contexts where the level of accuracy in grammar is not as high as the level of fluency. Additionally, Schmidt (1994) and Sharwood Smith (1993) claimed that in order to integrate linguistic form in the way of "intake" into the learner's L2 system, they would have to concentrate on form when exposing themselves to the input received, and also when developing output. In accordance with all this, Schmidt differentiates several kinds of attention that learners present when learning from CF, which are noticing, understanding and awareness. "Noticing" happens when the learner observes that his or her output differs to a large extent from the intended L2 input. However, "understanding" and "awareness" concern explicit knowledge. In addition, Schmidt states that when learners' attend to CF, this can become intake and through its internalisation it can reach the students' long-term memory.

With regard to the written context, these processes are crucial for L2 learning as students can obtain input from what they read in the form of positive evidence, and as negative evidence from what they read about their own written output. Moreover, learners are given lots of occasions to produce output, for instance, when revising texts as they have to correct them and when elaborating new writings. Another important aspect is that in WCF, noticing is necessary and always occurs as the feedback is explicit and they are given time to process it. In fact, language learning is more probable to occur in written contexts because of the availability of time they have to process the feedback and also due to the fact that students are asked to revise their texts and even to rewrite them (Bitchener, 2012: 351).

Finally, with the socio-cultural theory (SCT) we attend to a completely different view on how interaction influences in L2 learning. Its most relevant aspect is how it analyses the learning process, encompassing the manner in which learners react to and make use of the CF they are provided with or, on the contrary, the way in which they are unsuccessful to react to it. Moreover, cognitive development, without forgetting language development, appears as a consequence of social interactions. In the case of language learners, cognitive development takes place as a result of collaborative work and interactions with L2 speakers, who have a greater knowledge of the language than they have. These speakers would be teachers or higher level learners, for instance (Bitchener, 2012: 351-352).

Lantolf asserted that if L2 learners are given adequate "scaffolding", involving CF, their linguistic knowledge can be enhanced. Moreover, if this is provided, after some time learners could be "self-regulated", in other words, they could use the L2 in an independent and autonomous way. The zone where learning takes place and which is called the learner's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), would be the most efficacious for learning to be developed (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

Another important factor when analysing this theory was studied by Leontiev. He differentiated three levels in an activity: the motives, actions and conditions. The motives are the beliefs and attitudes which prompt the activity, the actions have originated as a result of the objectives to reach the action, and the conditions refer to the setting in which the activity is developed. These levels try to explain why some learners get involved with CF while others do not succeed to do so when elaborating a writing. Some learners may pay more attention to accuracy and want to learn from CF. However, others may centre attention on fluency and the quality of their writing while ignoring any kind of CF they receive. Thus, socio-cultural theory is important when assisting students who are in need of more scaffolding (Bitchener, 2012: 352).

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