Output, noticing and types of feedback in English Foreign Language

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INTRODUCTION

Given the communicative redundancy, infrequency and lack of saliency of much L2 input data, noticing is nowadays becoming widely accepted as a prerequisite for L2 learning to take place (e.g. Ellis, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990, 1995,2001; Schmidt and Frota, 1986; Skehan, 1998). The theoretical foundation underlying this assumption lies in the crucial role that, according to a number of scholars (e.g., Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1995; Tomlin and Villa 1994), attention plays in promoting linguistic processing in learners' second language development. Schmidt (2001), in particular, has emphasized the importance of noticing for language learning through the claim that "SLA is largely driven by what learners pay attention to and notice in target language input and what they understand the significance of noticed input to be" (pp. 3-4).

This view of noticing as the first step in the set of processes that constitute second language learning has been advocated from different strands of research. Ellis (1994, 1997), Lewis (1993) and Skehan (1998), for example, espouse the view that noticing accounts for the way in which input becomes intake available for integration into the learner's developing interlanguage system. Similarly, Gass (1988) argues that noticing is the first stage of language acquisition, Batstone (1996) refers to the importance of noticing by describing it as "the gateway to subsequent learning", and Rutherford (1987) and McLaughlin (1987) claim that noticing, as a feature in the input is an essential first step in language processing.

But there are comparatively few studies that have looked at the role of noticing in both L2 composing and subsequent feedback processing (Adams, 2003; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2002).

A review of the relevant scholarly literature will be presented. First, the arguments in favour of output as an essential process in second language learning will be briefly described and its functional role in promoting noticing will be ascertained. Then we will move into an essential component in the teaching of writing, which is the feedback provided by the teacher, and a typology of written corrective feedback techniques will be presented, and to end up we will deal with modelling as a form of written feedback.

OUTPUT AND NOTICING IN L2 LEARNING

Up until the 1980s the word output was used to indicate the outcome, or product, of the language acquisition process. Output was not considered a way to create knowledge but rather a manner to practice the knowledge that the learner already has. It was thus synonymous with "what the learners/system has learned", while the locus of SLA was primarily seen in the processing of input.

The evaluation French immersion programs in Canada (in which children were generally exposed to enormous amounts of input for several years) showed, however, that although immersion students, as compared to their francophone counterparts, reached similar scores in listening and reading, their speaking and writing abilities lagged largely behind. Furthermore, classroom observations showed that the immersion students did not talk as much in the French as in the English portion of the day (Swain, 1988). More

importantly, the teachers did not use to "push" the students to do so in a manner that was grammatically accurate or sociolinguistically appropriate.

As an alternative to this state of affairs and bearing in mind that the processes involved in processing input are generally quite different from those involved in producing language (Clark and Clark, 1977), Swain (1985 and elsewhere) proposed the output hypothesis. In contrast with the earlier views on output mentioned above, she claimed that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, not only the outcome of the process of second language learning but also a very important part of this process. Consequently, in addition to being exposed to input, learners have to be pushed to produce "comprehensible output", i.e., to produce semantically coherent, syntactically accurate and appropriate sentences. By doing so, they will supposedly be prompted to move from merely semantic to syntactic processing.

One of the language learning functions attributed by Swain to output is the noticing function, which is the main theoretical assumption underlying the present study. According to Swain (1995), the noticing function of output is based on the attested fact that, when generating output, learners may encounter gaps between what they want to say and what they are able to say, and so become aware of what they do not know or only know partially in their target language. This awareness of their own linguistic limitations ("noticing the hole") may also trigger in them the need to find out about their L2, thus facilitating more noticing in subsequent processing of target language input which may appear as feedback ("noticing the gap").

FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

In fact, an essential component in the teaching of writing is the feedback provided by the teacher on students' writing. As is the case with the learning of other skills, EFL student writers need to know when they are performing well or when they are facing problems (Zellermayer, 1989), what readers may expect from them or even what is beneficial for the improvement of their writing (Gordon Williams, 2003). These are some of the main reasons why a gradual expansion of research on feedback on students' writing has been observed in recent years (for overviews, see Ferris, 2007; Goldstein, 2004).

In an article entitled "A typology of written corrective feedback types", Ellis (2008), produced the taxonomy presented as an attempt to describe the most important forms of corrective feedback (CF) traditionally used by teachers:

Direct CF: The teacher provides the students with the correct form. This procedure is clearly desirable if learners do not know what the correct form is, but a clear disadvantage of its application is that it requires only minimal processing on the part of the learner.

Indirect CF: It involves indicating that the students have made an error without actually correcting it. Within indirect feedback, a division is usually made between indicating and locating the error or indicating the error only. Moreover, the teacher may also decide whether or not to identify the error type.

Metalinguistic CF: It involves providing learners with some form of explicit comment about the nature of the errors they have made. The explicit comment can take two forms. By far, the most common form is the use of error codes, which consist of abbreviated labels for different kinds of errors. The labels can be placed over the location of the error in the text or in the margin. The alternative form of metalinguistic corrective feedback consists of explaining the errors (giving brief grammatical descriptions).

Focused versus Unfocused CF: Teachers may choose to correct all of the student's errors, in which case the CF is unfocused. Alternatively, they may select specific error types for correction and focus their attention on

them. Processing corrections is likely to be more difficult in unfocused CF as the learner is required to attend to a variety of errors and thus is unlikely to be able to reflect much on each error. In this respect, focused CF may prove effective, as the learner is able to examine multiple corrections of a single error and thus obtain the rich evidence they need to both understand why what they wrote was erroneous and to acquire the correct form.

Once the different forms of traditional corrective feedback have been presented, a pressing question to elucidate is whether these forms help students improve their texts. Some studies seem to indicate that the provision of this type of feedback is of paramount importance in the L2 classroom context. Research on students' views of feedback suggests that they are often more willing to have their errors corrected by the teacher than through other forms of feedback (Lee, 2008, p. 145) because they consider it to be beneficial for their development as writers or because they give special importance to accuracy (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997; Leki, 1991). This latter assumption is confirmed by a number of scholars (Fathman & Walley, 1990; Ferris et al., 1997; Lalande, 1982) who suggest that teachers who give feedback by means of correcting errors may help students develop accuracy.

In contrast to these positive views, research suggests that there are various limitations to the effectiveness of feedback when it is given in the form of error correction.

These limitations are related to the lack of clarity, accuracy or balance between focus on form and meaning one may sometimes find in teachers' corrections (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990) and the lack of sensitivity on the part of teachers to students' needs and ability levels (Hyland, 1998). Even teachers themselves are reported to share the feeling that traditional error correction, which requires a great deal of time and effort, is not necessarily effective as students keep on making the same errors in successive compositions. Finally, a great number of studies confirm this intuition. Adams (2003) and Qi and Lapkin (2001), for example, offer a brief review of research on traditional corrections and summarize the main reasons to explain the failure of these types of feedback: traditional corrections mostly provide negative evidence (they only tend to show what is wrong), do not demand an active role from the learner, are often unclear and inaccurate and lack balance between focus on form, meaning or style. The conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the results about what should be regarded as appropriate and effective written feedback on students' errors are inconclusive and sometimes contradictory (Leki, 1990).

One alternative has been suggested to this state of affairs involves the use of modelling as a form of written feedback, which it will be discussed in the next section.

MODELLING AS ALTERNATIVE FORM OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK

Reformulation is a specific type of written feedback which is defined by Levenson (1978, in Qi & Lapkin, 2001, p. 281) as "a native speaker's rewriting of an L2 learner's composition such that the content the learner provides in the original draft is maintained, but its awkwardness, rhetorical inadequacy, ambiguity, logical confusion, style, and so on as well as lexical inadequacy and grammatical errors are tidied up". The rewritten text, by keeping the content of the original text intact, provides the learner with a target language model so that s/he can, in principle, make a comparison of his/her own draft with a native writer's version of it. Modelling is a type of written feedback which, may serve as a partial response to the problems learners experience with traditional written feedback. Models are not intended as reformulations of learners original texts, as they are usually written by native speakers or the teacher bearing in mind the learners' age, proficiency level, etc., as well as the content and the genre of the composition, but not the texts produced by the students. While reformulated writing may promote noticing of linguistic inadequacies in the original text through juxtaposition of the two related texts, models may serve the dual role of addressing alternative forms and developing the original content. ●

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