THE DEBATE ON WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK: ITS IMPORTANCE AND IMPLICATION FOR ACADEMIC WRITING INSTRUCTION IN EFL SETTINGS

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Abstract: More than a decade after Truscott (1996) claimed that written corrective feedback (CF) should be avoided, the debate on written CF is still ongoing. Although studies have been conducted and their results mostly support the advocates of written CF, issues with their methodology left practitioners in doubt. This article reviews extensive literature and the debate on written CF. Studies over the last decade have shown that, under certain circumstances, written CF could be beneficial for learners. Therefore, teachers should consider many factors before deciding to provide written CF to their students. The literature also indicates that further studies about the effect of written CF on syntactic complexity of learners' writing are still needed. Likewise, similar research in different context is also necessary.

Keywords: *written corrective feedback; error correction; writing; English as a foreign language*

Introduction

Providing written corrective feedback (CF), also known as 'grammar correction' or 'error correction', is a common practice among English teachers. Evans, Hartshorn and Tuoiti (2010) found that writing instructors give written CF for some reasons: it is their responsibility to provide written CF to their students; linguistic accuracy is an important aspect of writing; and it is helpful to show learners a good language model to follow in writing. However, despite its pervasive practice among EFL teachers, its efficacy is still debatable.

Truscott (1996, 1999) started the debate about the effectiveness of written CF years ago with his controversial statement, asserting that "grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned" (1996, p.327). According to him, the practice has no research ground, is not effective and could even be detrimental for students. This assertion gave rise to a campaign, most notably led by Ferris (1999, 2004), against Truscott's criticism, resulting in a series of studies in favor of written CF (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, Young, and Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Ferris and Roberts, 2001).

Responding to a growing number of studies refuting his claims, Truscott (2007), in his meta-analysis of previous studies on written CF, pointed out the possibility of the exaggeration of the positive effect of written CF. Truscott and Hsu (2008) further revealed in their study that written CF was not helpful for learners to lessen their linguistic errors in a new piece of writing.

Over the years, even more studies and reviews were conducted (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008, 2009, 2010b; Bruton, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima, 2008; Evans, Hartshorn, and Strong-Krause, 2011; Hartshorn, Evans, Merril, Sudweeks and Strong-Krause, 2010; Sheen, 2007; Van Beuningen, 2010; Van Beuningen, De Jong and Kuiken, 2011), with all of them indicating support to the practice of providing written CF. However, despite their positive results, only a few of these studies addressed Truscott's (1996, 1999) criticism about its potential to make learners employ avoidance strategy, pushing them produce composition with relatively high level of linguistic accuracy but low level of syntactic complexity.

Perhaps only Hartshorn et al (2010) and Van Beuningen et al (2011) answered Truscott's call on this issue. In both studies, the experimental groups improved on their linguistic accuracy and did not show a decline in the syntactic complexity of their writings. With only a limited number of studies investigating the effect of written CF on syntactic complexity, it is still difficult to settle the debate with a firm conclusion.

Written CF and Language Learning: Why the Debate Matters

With so much attention given to the debate and so many studies done to investigate the issue, one cannot help asking why the topic seems so important. In this section, I will briefly describe why the issue of providing written CF deserves our attention. I will also concisely justify two theoretical frameworks from which we can view the potential benefit of written CF in language learning.

Providing written CF is extensively practiced by teachers across the globe (Evans et al, 2010). Teachers devote much of their time to correct students' errors in hope they will be able to "revise their own writing and acquire correct English" (Ellis, 2012). Since providing written CF is practiced widely and time consuming, then it is important to seek for the answers to the questions about its efficacy: whether or not written CF fosters learners' acquisition of certain grammatical features and helps them to use those features accurately without

compromising the complexity of their writings. If it is not helpful, teacher should better use their time to focus on some other things that may help their students

The facilitative role of written CF in language learning can be seen from at least two perspectives: focus-on-form (FoF) and the Noticing Hypothesis. The term focus-on-form was coined by Long (1991) to refer to an unplanned, quick attention shift from meaning to linguistic form in a communicative activity. However, some researchers afterward expanded Long's version of FoF, allowing for some more variations: planned and unplanned FoF as well as reactive and pre-emptive FoF (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2002). As a feedback to learners' production, CF may serve as a reactive focus-on-form instrument that focuses their attention while being actively engaged in a task (Van Beuningen, 2010). This is why CF is considered as a potential support for learning, especially in writing context where CF does not interrupt the communication, leaving learners with much time to process it (Polio, Fleck, and Leder, 1998).

Closely related to the concept of focus-on-form, the Noticing Hypothesis, proposed by Schmidt (1990, 2001), may also be the theoretical framework for researchers to investigate CF. This theory suggests that implicit learning has a limited role in facilitating acquisition. To learn a form, leaners must first notice it. When learners notice the form with awareness, involving some degree of cognitive resources to process the form as input, they become aware of the difference between their production and the correct forms, which is commonly called *noticing the gap*. At this stage, the forms become intake and transferred to their interlanguage.

Thus, within the perspective of this theory, corrective feedback in writing stands a chance to support learning, because written communication provides plenty of time for learners to reflect on the input they receive, which in return gives a greater opportunity for noticing the gap to take place (Polio et all, 1998; Polio, 2012).
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Studies on Written Corrective Feedback

Much work has been done on written CF. In general, previous research on this topic fell into two categories: L2 writing-focused and SLA-focused (Ferris, 2010; Van Beuningen, 2010). The L2 writing-focused were generally concerned about CF and its relation to revision process (e.g. Ashwell, 2000; Ferris, 1997; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). The SLA-focused studies, on the other hand, tended to be more interested in finding the proof of the effect of CF on assisting language acquisition (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008, 2009, 2010b; Ellis et al., 2008; Evans, et al., 2011; Hartshorn et al., 2010; Sheen, 2007; Van Beuningen et al., 2011).

Even though the L2 writing-focused studies showed that CF had a positive effect in helping learners through revision process, whether or not its effect could be transferred to a new piece of writing was not investigated and remained unclear, leaving researchers in doubt if these studies could contribute to solve the big questions about written CF (Truscott and Hsu, 2008).

The SLA-focused studies, on the other hand, were scattered in several sub-areas of written CF, investigating the effect of different types of written CF. Many researchers investigated the efficacy of focused written CF, such as Bitchener (2008), Ellis et al (2008), and Sheen (2007). Their studies revealed that focused written CF positively affected learners' ability in producing a new piece of writing with less grammatical errors, claiming that focused written CF is helpful for students and supporting the provision of written CF in ESL or EFL writing classes.

Unlike the studies on focused written CF, research on unfocused written CF was not large in number. Truscott and Hsu (2008) compared the performance of a group of learners who received unfocused written CF with another group that did not get error corrections. They found that the learners who received written CF produced texts with better linguistic accuracy during revision sessions, but failed to exhibit a learning effect in a new piece of writing. Therefore, Truscott and Hsu (2008) concluded that improvement made during revisions could not be considered as a learning predictor. Responding to this, Bruton (2009) reviewed the study and pointed out the possible reason why there was no improvement made in the post test: the participants of the study had already showed a good performance since the pretest, so expecting them to make much improvement was simply out of question. In other words, the result was compromised by the ceiling effect.

Van Beuningen et al (2008, 2010) also investigated unfocused written CF. In their studies, they found that unfocused written CF was effective for improving learners' linguistic accuracy in both revision session and posttest. Not only it was significantly effective to help the participants to produce writings with less grammatical errors, but it also had no negative effect on the linguistic complexity of their writings (Van Beuningen et al, 2011). With these findings, the researchers argued to have clearly proven that Truscott's (1996, 1999, 2007) claim—that written CF may be harmful for students—was untrue.

In sum, many SLA-focused studies on written CF, apart from their limitations, showed that written CF tend to be effective to improve learners' ability to write accurately. They indicated that under certain conditions, written CF could be helpful. Regarding the result of these studies, Van Beuningen (2010) confidently stated that:

...by offering learners opportunities to notice the gaps in their developing L2 systems, test interlanguage hypotheses, and engage in metalinguistic reflection, written CF has the ability to foster and to lead to accuracy development." (p.21)

What Does It Mean for EFL Teachers? Pedagogical Implications

There are some implications we can draw from studies on written CF. First, we should limit the correction on certain grammatical features only (e.g. subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, etc.). Research (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008) has shown us that written CF could result in statistically significant effect in reducing learner's grammatical errors. Bitchener (2008) asserted that when learners' attention was focused only on specific types of corrections, they could cognitively process the input more effectively and, therefore, learning is more likely to take place.

Second, always ask learners' to revise their work. Since they have much time to reflect on the feedback given, learners would be more likely to internalize the input from written CF (Polio et all, 1998; Polio, 2012). This means that process approach to teaching writing is a good way to adopt since this approach requires learners to revise their writing multiple times. Furthermore, it is better for teachers to provide feedback on content only at the first stage of revision and move on to grammar errors afterward. This is beneficial to keep learners motivated because dealing with both issues at the same could be overwhelming for learners, especially when they make many grammatical errors.

Finally, we should tailor the feedback according to our students' proficiency level (Hsu, 2014). For advanced learners, indirect CF would be enough. These learners tend to have sufficient knowledge of grammar rules to understand the indirect corrections. For low proficiency learners, in contrast, this method could be frustrating. They would need feedback that directly mentions the errors made and, if possible, a brief comment or explanation showing why certain words or sentences in their writing should be changed or rewritten.

Conclusion

Numerous studies over the last decade have provided us insights to improve our teaching practices. There is ample research showing that written CF, if given correctly, could be helpful for learners to improve their accuracy in writing. Therefore, the time has come for both researchers and practitioners to view written CF positively.

It is important to remember, however, that the studies discussed in this paper were mostly conducted in ESL setting. Given the fact that ESL and EFL settings are different (Longcope, 2009; Renandya, 2013), similar study in EFL context is necessary. Also, more studies that investigate the effect of written CF on learners' syntactic complexity are still required.

More importantly, the author must emphasize that in practice there is no one best way to give feedback. Teachers should consider many things before making decisions. Variables like learners' proficiency level, course objective, etc. should be taken into account (Hsu, 2014).By considering these factors and referring to the available literature on the subject, it is hoped that teachers could make an informed decision for their practices that would best fit their students.

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