
Written Corrective Feedback in English Learning: A Case Study in an English-Spanish bilingual school

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Introduction

“Writing is the process of thinking to create an idea, express it through the sentences into paragraphs, organize the idea and revise it to convey meaningful information via a written system of coded signals” (Estrem, 2015, pp. 19-20).

A certain students’ mindset is required in the development of the writing competence. This entails that the psychological development should also be considered in this respect. Indeed, writing is argued to be one of the most complicated skills to be developed by a second language (L2, hereinafter) learner (Sari, 2016). When L2 learners turn their ideas into writing, this requires the mastery of writing organization skills, linguistic knowledge, along with a lexical array (Hossain, 2015). Teachers help students overcome these situations by informing them about their errors and provide the so-called Corrective Feedback (CF, hereinafter).

According to AbuSeileek and Abualsha (2014, pp. 76-95), “CF is one of the foremost tools to increase L2 English learning and teaching with the provision of feedback for the students in order to correct their errors”. Previous works in this field have revealed some benefits in L2 learning outcomes when L2 teachers make use of CF in class (Harmer, 2001). For instance, language error identification aids students to reflect on written accuracy and, thus, boosts L2 development.

In the light of earlier studies and in order to fill the gap in CF research, this work aims to shed light on the effectiveness (or lack thereof) in the use of direct written CF in L2 English learning. More specifically, it examines a group of Primary Education students that receives direct written CF by the teacher.

The present chapter is structured as follows. Subsequent to this Introduction, section 2 presents earlier formal studies on Written Corrective Feedback (WCF, hereinafter) in L2 development. Section 3 is devoted to posing the research questions (RQs, hereinafter) of our study. Section 4 discusses the methodology that guides the data analysis. Section 5 analyses the data gathered. Section 6 discusses the results in the light of earlier empirical works. Section 7 draws conclusions and offers future lines of research.

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Formal studies on Written Corrective Feedback in L2 development¹

“Learning how to write will take much longer time than reading and listening comprehension” (Estrem, 2015, pp. 19-20). Based on this statement, everyone can understand more languages when compared to what they can express and produce (Cameron, 2001; Lundahl, 1998). According to Harmer (2001, p. 205), “if students’ writing abilities are not developed in their first language (L1, hereinafter), in their L2 these abilities will also be underdeveloped”. Thus, the influence of the L1 on the L2 will reflect some of the difficulties that might occur when learning how to write in an L2.

The teacher should keep track on the students’ development of writing skills since this practice plays an important role in their learning performance. Given that writing and creativity go hand in hand, communication and interaction are the key for developing the ability to process ideas (Hidayati, 2018; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Vygotsky, 1981). Children develop the cognitive ability to make sense of the world they are surrounded by and learn how to express those thoughts through speaking and writing. For Cameron (2001, pp. 202-205), “young language learners need to make use of their cognitive abilities and write not just because they need to, but because they see a purpose for it.” Students should get the chance to process texts, write several drafts and edit them to produce a final written product. Teachers must explicitly point out grammatical errors and teach students how to avoid them (Cameron, 2001).

Accuracy will not always be the main goal. Emotions towards L2 development have a great impact on how students develop their skills (Schutz, 2018). The so-called “affective filter” is an important factor with regards to how learners develop the language. In fact, the affective filter performs as a facilitator that checks whether the learner’s reading and writing tasks are enjoyable and fun (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Low self-esteem leads to low motivation and this can have devastating effects on students’ development in the long run. Thus, independent text writing tasks in which students are supposed to express their ideas represent a typology of written activities that require the teacher’s provision of feedback (Cameron, 2001; Lundahl, 1998).

When the writer first comes up with ideas, they are organized in a mind map, followed by the development of a first draft (Keh, 1990). Schallert and Lee (2008) explain that in the process of writing, the content is the main focus. This is an ongoing process where students might write multiple drafts and receive direct and indirect CF based on the ideas, structure, content, grammar and spelling; their final product usually receives a summative grade or an endnote (Keh, 1990).

Lightbown and Spada (2013) argue that students supported by the teachers in their learning process are highly likely to succeed in their L2 development. This support should occur within the so-called Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The learning process meets a students’ current level rather than a level that is far beyond the students’ area of comfort or unknown to them. Thus, feedback should be provided to seek the students’ improvement. They will be challenged and encouraged to use their capabi-

¹ This work is a development of the abstract published in the CIVINEDU Conference 2020 Book of Proceedings.

lities through scaffolded instruction to reach their goals. As soon as the students develop the target ability, the teacher's help will decrease gradually so that the students can reach learning independence (Storch, 2018).

Hockett (1960) first introduced the “duality of patterning” property of human language, which allows a combinatorial structure on two distinct levels, namely, meaningless sounds and words. Meaningless sounds can be combined to form words, whereas words can be organized within the sentences of a discourse. It is by trial and error that learners will combine these two components to produce oral or written output. If the output is unintelligible, teachers will give feedback and encourage successful utterances. When feedback is provided, the student's unsuccessful production is obliterated. Bearing in mind Skinner's (1957) behaviouristic language acquisition theory and the principle of reinforcement, feedback has proven to have effective outcomes on language teaching. The power of praise and rewards has been described as a successful teaching tool on learners' L2 development. When teachers praise, students are encouraged to repeat the action (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

As far as the learning tasks are concerned, while some are used as a source of motivation towards writing skills in general, others are used to express and communicate feelings and ideas. In some other cases, accuracy is achieved by attaining a certain phrase, sentence pattern or linguistic feature. Cadierno and VanPatten (1993) suggest that students are not able to focus on form and meaning at once. This contrasts with theories about scaffolding languages for different purposes where explicit teaching and learning is carried out by pointing out at language features when addressing writing accuracy (Gibbons, 2009; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Regardless of the purpose of the writing task, teachers will give some form of feedback during or after it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sheen, 2007). For example, Hattie & Timperley (2007) differentiate two main approaches to feedback, namely, direct CF or indirect CF.

Research questions

Taking as a starting point earlier works on CF (see section 2), the following RQs and predictions have been formulated:

RQ1. Do L2 English learners reduce the rate of errors in their writing tasks after they have received written CF?

Based on RQ 1, an error decrease is predicted in the L2 English learners' written output and, what is more, accuracy in writing is expected to improve. These data will be in line with a study on direct metalinguistic CF conducted by Diab (2015) that supports the errors reduction by providing WCF. Likewise, Ibarrolla (2013) also reported such a reduction in the students' drafts through a writing-correction-rewriting task.

RQ2. What is the impact of written direct CF in the L2 English teaching practice?

In view of RQ 2, CF is expected to be positive in the teaching methodology implemented in the present work (see section 4). This is predicted to be the case since Primary Education children at such a basic L2 English level do not have the ability to self-correct their work and they need the teacher's help to develop their writing skills. This prediction is supported by Skinner's (1957) behaviouristic approach and his “principle of reinforcement”.

Methodology

Participants

This research has been carried out with a group of 50 8-year-old students who follow the 3rd grade of Primary Education. Out of this target population, a group of individuals was randomly chosen according to whether they have finished up all the tasks included in the study. A parental consent form was delivered and signed up. Yet, only 26 students finished their written tasks and, therefore, they were the ones who ultimately participated in the study. This means that 52% of the group has taken part in the present work. The study was included in the yearly program of L2 English subject, and parents were informed in both general and individual meetings. This study also included a control group and it used a stratified randomization.

Tasks and procedure

A pre-test and a post-test were conducted. In order to examine the participants' performance in their writing accuracy skills, four different items were qualitatively analysed to identify patterns and common themes among the L2 English learners' responses. This qualitative analysis examined data according to the participants' years of experience in L2 English writing skills.

Students were exposed to the reading and writing section of the Cambridge Assessment test which, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2002), checks the students' level of competence in L2. The target population had already achieved the expected level Pre-A1 Starters.

The participants were exposed to a pre-test to check the most common errors. Thus, the pre-test was implemented as a starting point in this research. The data collected in the pre-test were classified and analysed for later comparison to those results examined in a post-test.

The study consisted of different written tasks taken from the students' coursebook and they were accomplished along two months. A series of written drafts involved topics that students were familiar with and focused on the development of the four L2 skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as part of a syllabus design for the whole school year. For instance, students were asked to write essays on a wide variety of topics, namely, (a) describe the park or the place where you go to play; (b) describe your favourite animal; (c) describe a member of your family; and (d) describe your friend and what s/he is wearing.

Authentic short texts were provided as a visual input aid so that the participants could adapt the layout to their own reality and fill in the gaps with their own information. The teacher handed the essays back to the students with the inclusion of direct WCF and a reformulation of the errors produced.

Data classification

The data analysed were classified into four different types of errors, namely, spelling, word order, vocabulary and punctuation. Every mistake was codified according to the established premises so that one point was allocated to each student's mistake produced in their written work.

We follow Al-Jarf's (2014) classification regarding spelling. Spelling failure or misspelling refers to "any word that does not match the target word in part or in full" (Al-Jarf's, 2014, p. 5). He classified spelling errors in terms of (a) ignorance of the English spelling rules; (b) transfer from Spanish and mispronunciation, that is, in cases in which students spelled with a non-phonetic spelling as it is pronounced in their L1; (c) overgeneralization, namely, imposing certain spelling features such as double letters, silent consonant and vowels, silent consonant and vowel digraphs on words that do not contain them; and (d) unfamiliarity with American pronunciation which included failure to recognize flaps and elision. Some spelling errors (SP) were traced especially in the pre-test and the post-test stages. Spelling mistakes were also regarded as lexical or vocabulary. In (1), there are a few spelling errors that can be spotted.

(1) He's wearing a colorful wolly (SP) jeans(.) he's wearing a plain scarf an (SP) a funny polyester t-shirt (.)"

Misordering or word order (WO) errors were assessed in their written drafts and in a more specific task in which the given components of a sentence had to be set in order. We follow a classification made by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) who classify WO errors into six different categories: (a) omission of grammatical morphemes; (b) double marking of semantic features; (c) use of irregular rules; (d) use of wrong word forms; (e) alternating use of two or more forms; and (f) misordering. In (2), WO errors deal with the position of words in a sentence.

(2) You are woolly wearing a jumper

Vocabulary (VOC) errors were considered any time the participant made a mistake of collocation or use. In (3), there are misused words from a syntactic and a semantic point of view.

(3) She's wearing a colourful boluse (SP), is it (WO) cotton, a jenne (SP) black and pink (WO). two jaceut (SP) blue (WO) di polyeter (SP) and two flip flop (SP) (VOC) wolly (SP) is a fancy

Both misspelled words and WO mistakes are associated with the linguistic influence from the L1 (Spanish) into the L2 (English).

Furthermore, punctuation errors were considered when the participants did not show proper understanding or use of the basic punctuation rules. The use of commas, stops and capital letters was labelled as a punctuation error. More specifically, 0 points were given in the case of a proper use of the rules at a sentential level (no error/success), and 1 point was given when the use was still unbalanced (error/unsuccess). In (4), there is a description of what this learner's friend is wearing. In this example, errors are labelled according to four categories, namely, spelling (SP), word order (WO), vocabulary (VOC) and punctuation (PUNCT).

(4) He's wearing a colorful wolly (SP) jeans(.) he's wearing a plain scarf an (SP) a funny polyester t-shirt(.

In the case of punctuation, we have followed the error classification proposed by Hengwichitkul (2006) and James (1998).²

² James (1998) distinguished five categories of errors: (a) grammatical errors (adjectives, adverbs, articles, nouns, possession, pronouns, prepositions and verbs); (b) substance errors (capitalization, punctuation and spelling), (c) lexical errors (word formation and word selection); (d) syntactic errors (coordination/subordination, sentence structure and ordering), and (e) semantic errors (ambiguous communication and miscommunication).

Data Analysis

In the pre-test stage, the data were gathered by means of a written task that consisted of a compilation of assessment activities. Regarding spelling, and as illustrated in Figure 1, every participant showed at least more than one mistake. It is also remarkable the fact that 35% of the participants made 8 spelling mistakes, which subsequently comes up as a high percentage.

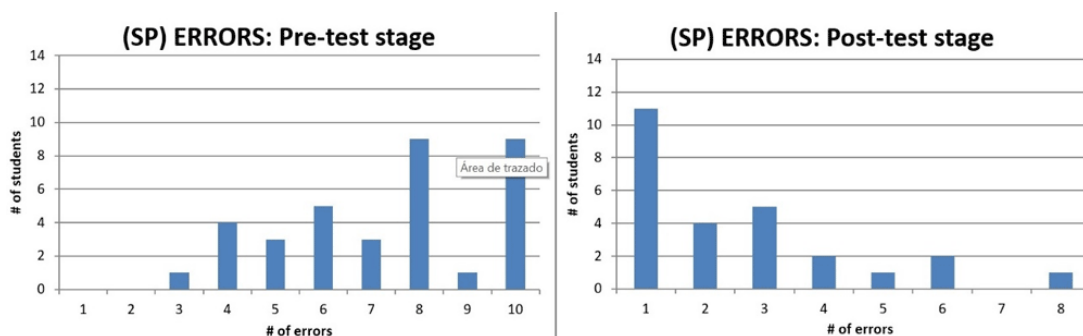


Figure 1. (SP) Spelling Errors: Pre-test and Post-test

As for the post-test stage, there is a sharp decrease in the number of errors produced. This means that the occurrence is high for the event “no errors”. These data were gathered two months later when implementing the same written task as in the pre-test stage.

As far as the WO error category is concerned, the number of occurrences is illustrated in Figure 2 for the pre-test and the post-test stages. In the case of the pre-test, our findings reveal that the lower the occurrence of errors is, the lower the rate of errors produced is. However, the participants who made 4 or 7 WO errors is still high.

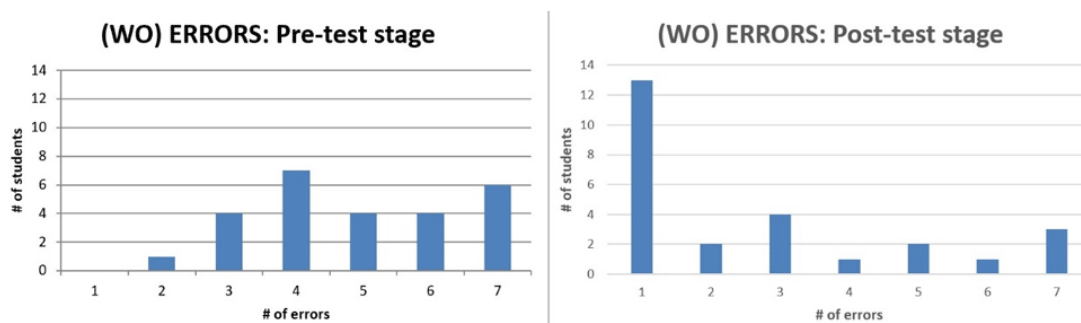


Figure 2. (WO) Word Order Errors: Pre-test and Post-test

In the case of the post-test, and as displayed in Figure 2, most students did not produce any mistakes, regardless of the type. These data show that the percentage of participants who made only one spelling error is relatively high. In other words, 50% out of the 26 participants reduced their WO mistakes from the pre-test to the post-test.

The occurrence of VOC errors is displayed in Figure 3. It reveals that in the pre-test stage most of the participants made 4 or 6 mistakes, which subsequently represents a high percentage of errors. However, as it can be seen the number of errors decreases in the post-test stage and the rate of students who only had 1 mistake is the highest.

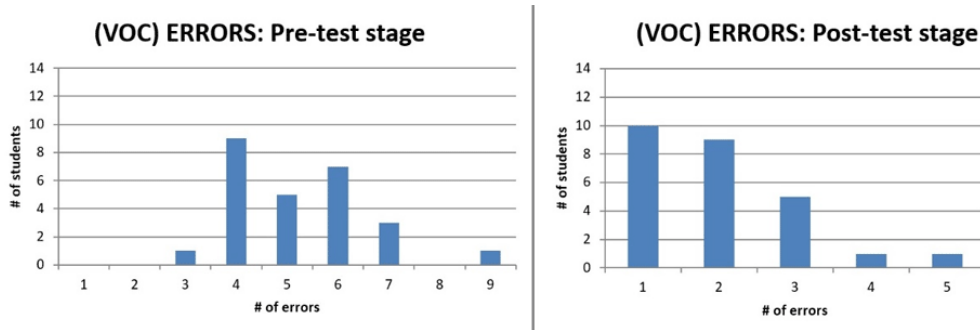


Figure 3. (VOC) Vocabulary Errors: Pre-test and Post-test

The results on the category PUNCT errors are displayed in Figure 4. In the case of the pre-test stage, the percentage of accuracy at implementing the PUNCT rules is still lower (31%) when compared to the percentage of “Incorrect Punctuation” (69%).



Figure 4. (PUNCT) Punctuation Errors: Pre-test and Post-test

Figure 4 also shows the use of punctuation in the post-test stage. More specifically, the percentage in “Correct Punctuation” (62%) is higher than that in “Incorrect Punctuation”(38%). In the present work, punctuation has been considered as a cross-curricular goal that is going to be worked in every subject of formal schooling. Indeed, there seem to be fewer participants who use punctuation in a wrong way when compared to those ones who showed a correct use of punctuation and capitalization rules, as seen in Figure 4.

To sum up, the total amount of errors that the L2 English learners obtained in both stages (that is, in the pre-task and the post-task), decreased abruptly from 14 errors to 5 errors for the four target error categories (see section 4.3). Therefore, direct CF effectiveness is supported by these measures and the results reflected in the L2 English learners’ written output.

Discussion

Disagreement between researchers on the value of CF in students' writing has existed over decades as laid by Truscott (1996), Hattie & Timperley (2007), Ferris (2004), Hyland (2006) among others. Two opposite views concerning the positive or negative impact of WCF have taken part in the English language teaching research field. For example, Truscott (1996) claimed that correcting the students' errors is futile and potentially harmful; hence, provision of WCF should be excluded from the content of the writing classes. Moreover, he pointed out that the correction of students' writing does not affect the real use of the language for communicative purposes positively although many disputes on the effectiveness of WCF are settled in favour of its implementation in the classroom. Likewise, Fazio (2001) observed that the comments group outperformed the correction group and, thus, these findings reveal that CF harmed the students' accuracy.

There has been a significant fall in the number of error occurrences from the pre-stages to the post-stages once WCF was implemented by the teacher. Therefore, the use of WCF has played a significant role in the L2 English learners' written output. These findings are in line with previous researchers who also found out that feedback helps the decrease in L2 errors and rises students' motivation in L2 learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Therefore, our data speak against Truscott's (2007) argument that states that CF goes against grammar correction.

Although our findings suggest that error correction is an effective tool for improving students' writing accuracy, other questions such as the influence of language proficiency on feedback uptake, or the possible avoidance of complex structures due to error correction remain to be unanswered.

Error correction proves to be effective depending on the type of error. For instance, although spelling errors are easier to measure than grammatical errors, grammatical errors were divided into WO and word use in this study. One of Truscott's (2004; 2007) alternative explanations for developing accuracy in L2 writing skills is avoidance. In line with this, the corrected students in Chandler's (2003) study might not have gained accuracy because they simplified the language style in their writing compositions. CF aims to make learners aware of the errors they produce, and this awareness creates motivation for students to avoid the grammatical constructions (Truscott, 2007). Further research will be required to investigate the avoidance hypothesis.

Previous formal studies (Ferris, 2004; Hyland, 2006) suggest that indirect CF is not as advantageous as direct WCF at lower proficiency L2 levels. Linguistic competence to self-correct their errors is crucial; therefore, the present work has shed light on the influence of language proficiency and the different feedback forms via the implementation of direct and reformulation CF. Our results show that the use of CF in content-related classes can also improve students' written accuracy. Moreover, direct error correction seems to be more effective than indirect error correction for this study's population, since the provision of direct CF did not only lead to more accurate revisions, but also to more accurate performance in a new written task.

It has been observed that there were some gains when comparing the figures obtained in the pre-test stage and the post-test. This is seen in the progression through drafts and written tasks handed over by the students along the study. For the evaluation of the long-term communicative gains, Truscott (2007) suggests that the student should be monitored by the teacher who performs as a facilitator in the teaching and the learning process. Likewise, our results lend support to Chandler's (2003) study on the effectiveness of various types of feedback on errors. He concluded that provision of CF between assignments contributed to students' accuracy significantly.

Our study reveals a progress on students' writing skills, especially with regards to accuracy. Students were incapable of detecting and correcting their own errors on coherence, and this is the reason why reformulation feedback was implemented in their written compositions as a basic procedure to work with their drafts. The study conducted by Bitchener (2005) on the impact of different feedback types on students' writing skills goes hand in hand with the outcomes observed in the present work since it revealed that WCF significantly aided students' accuracy in the use of L2 English definite articles and simple past tense.

The participants of the present work benefitted from direct CF in their writing skills not only in terms of spelling and WO but also in terms of vocabulary use and punctuation, as also reported by Russell and Spada (2006). Although disagreements on the L2 learning potential of WCF were debated, there currently seem to be growing studies suggesting that error correction is effective for improving L2 learners' written accuracy over time. Recent WCF studies show that learners improve their compositions after they receive the teacher's feedback. Therefore, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) were on the right track when stating that these findings argue against Truscott's (1996) claim that CF only leads to "fake learning".

According to Beuningen *et al.* (2010), CF leads to greater accuracy gains than mere writing practice. The present study concluded that direct feedback helps students correct both their accuracy and fluency written errors in a short period of time and with more permanent results (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Broadly speaking, both the current study and Bitchener and Knoch's (2010) work found that learners not only benefit from direct WCF, but also from reformulation feedback.

Conclusion

Direct CF proved to have a long-term effect on L2 English students' accuracy in writing skills. Two observations lead us to suggest that the direct treatment was more effective when compared to the provision of indirect CF. This finding contradicts the prediction in previous works regarding the fact that students benefit more from indirect CF because they must engage in a more profound form of language processing as they self-edit their output (Ferris, 1995; Lalande, 1982). The opportunity to practice writing did not yield any

significant impact on students' written accuracy. These data do not lend support to Truscott's (2004) claim that accuracy gains come from writing practice (namely, time-on-task differences between treatment groups) rather than from error correction. Many students proved to show low-quality spelling in English. The results reported in this work suggest that a spelling course can be developed and integrated into the English course with the aim of providing students with the basics of English spelling rules.

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