



Future Directions in Feedback on Second Language Writing: Overview and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the contributions made to this special issue on feedback by the seven papers, examining how they reflect both the growing interest in different areas of research into feedback on writing and the continuing search by teachers for more effective feedback practices. Focusing first on the papers by Van Beuningen, Storch, Evans, Hartshorn and Allen, it discusses how these papers situate written corrective feedback research in the wider area of second language acquisition research and contribute to the debate in feedback research on research design issues. This is followed by an examination of the major findings of the four situated empirical studies by Bitchener, Ma, El-ebyary and Windeatt, and Martinez and Roca, which make up the second section. Echoing the authors of these papers, this article argues that we need more longitudinal naturalistic studies, adopting both cognitive and socio-cultural SLA frameworks to investigate the role of feedback and its impact on individual learners in more depth. Finally some pedagogic implications are discussed, including the need for feedback practices which facilitate students' abilities to self regulate and evaluate their performance, and the need to raise teachers' awareness of the different feedback sources and modes of delivery available to them.

KEYWORDS:

Feedback on writing, written corrective feedback, second language writing, second language acquisition

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una revisión de las siete aportaciones incluidas en este número especial sobre *feedback*, constatando cómo reflejan tanto el creciente interés por el tema en las distintas áreas de investigación como la continua búsqueda de técnicas más efectivas por parte del profesorado. Centrándose en primer lugar en las contribuciones de Van Beuningen, Storch, Evans, Hartshorn y Allen, analiza cómo estos artículos sitúan la investigación sobre *feedback* en la corrección de trabajos escritos dentro del área más amplia de adquisición de segundas lenguas, contribuyendo al debate, dentro de la investigación sobre *feedback*, en torno a aspectos de diseño de la investigación. A continuación se examinan los resultados principales de los cuatro estudios empíricos realizados por Bitchener, Ma, El-ebyary & Windeatt, y Martinez & Roca de Larios, que conforman la segunda sección. Siguiendo a estos autores, el artículo aboga por la realización de más estudios longitudinales de corte naturalista, que utilicen enfoques dentro del campo de la Adquisición de Segundas Lenguas tanto de carácter cognitivo como sociocultural, para investigar con más profundidad el papel del *feedback* y su impacto en perfiles concretos de aprendices. Finalmente, se tratan algunas implicaciones pedagógicas, incluyendo la necesidad de que las prácticas de *feedback* faciliten el desarrollo de habilidades de autocorrección y de evaluación del propio rendimiento por parte de los estudiantes, y la necesidad de incrementar el conocimiento que los docentes tienen acerca de las distintas fuentes y modos de implementación de *feedback*.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Feedback en la escritura, corrección de trabajos escritos, escritura en segundas lenguas, adquisición de segundas lenguas

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1. INTRODUCTION

The articles in this special issue of *IJES* reflect both the rapid growth in interest in different areas of research into feedback on writing and the continuing search by teachers for ways to make their feedback practices more effective. In the last two decades feedback has become a central issue for writing research. Developments in writing pedagogy have been informed by this research and technological advances have also resulted in far reaching changes to feedback practices, with a greater emphasis on peer and collaborative feedback, the provision of oral feedback in writing conferences, and the growing importance of computer-mediated feedback. There has been a shift towards a more developmental view of feedback, with greater emphasis on its formative potential for improving both student writing and their writing and language learning processes, even when it is given summatively on students' final writing products.

Recently much feedback research has centred on strengthening the links between feedback on writing and SLA theories and has sought to investigate whether feedback has an effect on language proficiency and development, with a focus on the potential role of written corrective feedback (WCF). Other theories have also led to a number of developments in feedback research. From a genre perspective, feedback is also seen as having a crucial role in terms of the development of the academic and professional literacy skills needed for participation in new communities of practice. In addition, the influence of socio-cultural theories of language development has focused attention on the collaborative and interactive aspects of feedback and its crucial dialogic role in scaffolding learning. However, despite all these developments, making decisions about giving feedback and designing effective feedback systems remain a challenge to teachers in many different contexts and a large number of questions about giving effective feedback have been only partially resolved.

In this final article I will draw together some key findings and issues raised by the different contributors to this special volume and consider the implications and directions for future research on feedback.

2. THE ROLE OF WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

In the first section of this volume, papers by Van Beuningen and Storch, have provided very valuable overviews of a number of important issues related to the different areas of research currently being carried out into feedback on writing, with an emphasis on the research on written corrective feedback.

Van Beuningen has focused on the current debate on the role of written corrective feedback in second language writing and has located this in the wider area of second

language acquisition research with its theoretical foundations in the long established research on the role of corrective feedback in second language acquisition (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). She reminds us of the SLA arguments emphasising the learning potential of focusing on form in second language teaching. Focus on form (FonF) is defined by Long (1991, pp. 45–46) as instruction that “*overtly* draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally” when the primary focus is on meaning or communication. Van Beuningen contrasts these views with the naturalistic perspective on language learning advocated by Krashen (1985), who has argued that FonF instruction can only affect explicit knowledge, not the acquisition of implicit knowledge. These arguments essentially revolve around the wider SLA debate about whether explicit knowledge about language can speed up the acquisition of implicit knowledge and whether explicit knowledge can evolve into implicit knowledge through practice and eventually lead to changes in the learners’ interlanguage. This has been an area of discussion and contention in second language writing research for the last three decades in the debate between the two camps; those who believe written correction on error can help learners to both improve their drafts and their longer term writing ability (e.g. Ferris (1999, 2004, 2006, 2010), Chandler (2004, 2009), Ellis et al. (2008), Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, (2009); and those who have argued against this (e.g. Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2009). This issue seems unlikely to be resolved in the near future, but it continues to be a valuable debate and it serves to remind us, as Ferris (2010) points out, that despite its links with research in the areas of rhetoric and composition studies in the first language, second language writing is a form of language production and an aspect of second language communicative competence for many learners. An investigation of both the parallels and contrasts between SLA research on error correction and research on written corrective feedback offers valuable insights for both research and teaching.

It also reminds us that teachers need to think carefully before giving corrective feedback. They should not react reflexively to the errors in the student texts in front of them, but should also act reflectively, considering the possible uses students will make of their feedback and its potential for language development. In order to enable us to know more about how students use written corrective feedback, Van Beuningen echoes Storch’s call later in this special issue for more qualitative studies over a period of time to provide a more nuanced and complex picture (Brunton, 2009) of the potential of WCF to bring about language improvement. Van Beuningen points out that many of the previous studies have involved short-term feedback treatments on only one or two language features, such as article errors, which do not reflect the reality of the language classroom. She argues that research should focus on the potential of comprehensive corrective feedback rather than focused feedback since this is the most widely used form of feedback given by teachers and may also be a form of feedback which better reflects teachers’ aims in that it is concerned with the writing as a whole rather than the writing as a way of practising grammar. I would like to pick up this point and have argued strongly in the past (Hyland, 1998, 2000) for more

longitudinal studies of individual learners engaging with feedback over a complete course where written corrective feedback is supported by oral feedback in workshops and classrooms and other sources of feedback, such as peer review and reinforced by other activities and interactions in the classroom.

In the second paper in this issue, Storch also focuses on the research on WCF, but she looks more closely at issues related to research design. Taking Ferris's 2004 overview of WCF research, as a watershed, she looks at studies before and after 2003 to see if researchers have addressed the problematic research design issues and contradictions in findings highlighted by Ferris in 2004. While she acknowledges that greater uniformity is found in the recent studies, both in terms of research design and findings, she makes an important caveat that studies have tended to focus on a limited range of structures. Echoing Van Beuningen's points, she also argues that the 'one shot' nature of much feedback research and the limited opportunities for student interaction and engagement in most studies means that very important affective factors are largely ignored in many WCF research designs.

This is a crucial area for future studies. Rather than seeing students as limited to the role of responder to feedback, we have to view them as active agents, constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning and responding and adapting their writing and revision strategies over a period of time to the feedback they receive. Active student participation and engagement is crucial if the language learning potential of written corrective feedback is to be fully exploited in tertiary contexts. Students value feedback for its potential role in their language development. Looking at case studies engaging with feedback (Hyland, 2003, forthcoming), I found that students also developed their own strategies for using feedback and they found their own feedback sources to improve their drafts. Since these strategies and activities for engaging with the feedback were self-initiated and the feedback sources were ones they felt comfortable with, motivation to use the feedback was very strong. Recognizing that students have agency and encouraging them to use and develop their own feedback strategies and sources of feedback may help them to exploit the potential of written corrective feedback and assist their development as independent writers.

3. EXPLORING FEEDBACK ISSUES IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

While the papers in the first section of this volume have explored these broader theoretical issues related to written corrective feedback and have made some valuable suggestions for future research directions, the second section investigates a wider range of feedback issues via situated empirical research. Papers by Evans et al, Bitchener et al, Ma, El-ebyary and Windeatt, and Martinez and Roca report on specific studies examining different aspects of feedback in various contexts.

In the first paper in this section, Evans et al. focus on WCF from another perspective - that of the teachers. They argue that understanding teachers' perspectives on feedback is fundamental to understanding the role of written corrective feedback in second language writing pedagogy. In order to investigate this aspect of feedback in a wide range of contexts globally, Evans et al. devised and implemented a wide ranging electronic survey of teacher's written corrective feedback practices and their perspectives and principles related to written corrective feedback. This survey generated more than a thousand responses from teachers in a range of teaching contexts in sixty-nine different countries. It included both native and non-native English speaking teachers and the majority were highly experienced. Their study confirmed that teachers globally use WCF extensively because they believe that students both need and expect it and they often use second language acquisition theories to justify its use. In addition they have some conviction from their practical experience as teachers that WCF will have an impact on students, even though they are uncertain of its overall effectiveness. This tendency for teachers to 'theorize from practice and practice what they theorize' (Kumarivadivelu, 1994: 27, quoted in Evans et al. this volume) indicates that teachers tend to have a pragmatic but positive view of the impact of WCF on their learners.

This study is valuable because of the international composition of the survey respondents and the variety of different educational contexts they teach in. Much of the current research on WCF focuses on writing course in the North American tertiary context. The global reach of English suggests the need for wider ranging research on teachers' beliefs and practices to reflect the myriad variety of contexts where feedback on L2 writing is given and used. Global online surveys like the one used in this study offer great potential for future large scale surveys investigating different feedback issues in a wide range of settings.

Bitchener et al.'s paper examines supervisory feedback using questionnaires and interviews with supervisors from different discipline areas (humanities, science and commerce) in a New Zealand university. This is an important area because although feedback on writing from language teachers and tutors on writing and proficiency courses has been widely explored at the secondary and tertiary levels, the impact of feedback to ESL writers in other educational contexts has received less attention. Supervisor feedback is an area with great potential for future investigation. Researchers have recently turned their attention to the challenges faced by second language writers at universities as they move from 'peripheral participation' to 'full participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 37) and engage in research activities in the academic community. Effective relationships between students and their supervisors and the provision of feedback are essential for L2 learners' success in their research and their writing (Belcher, 1994; Shaw, 1991). Students' cultural understandings and previous educational experiences can impact on their relationships with their supervisors and affect the success and progress of their research and their enculturation into the academic discourse community (Prior, 1995; Kruse, 2007) Feedback for research students can come from many sources, but it is essential that students have access to an expert disciplinary

informant to develop their ability to both acquire and integrate genre knowledge into their writing (Tardy, 2009).

Bitchenner et al. focus on the ways supervisors use feedback to help enculturate the students into a new discipline and make them aware of new forms of literacy and genre specific requirements. They make the important point that supervisors taking part in their study viewed feedback as an important part of the teaching and learning dialogue they had with their students, and as a way of helping students to move towards becoming independent writers in the tertiary context. The study also investigated another important issue in writing research: the issue of disciplinary differences, seeking to discover whether there were differences in the types of feedback provided across disciplines. In fact, different disciplines focused on similar areas and supervisors tended to give similar feedback to both L1 and L2 students. Bitchenner et al. point out the need for future research to focus on the feedback given to students at different stages of their theses. I would argue that researchers should not just focus on the feedback given by tutors and supervisors in such contexts but that they should also focus on the students' engagement with this feedback. While supervisory feedback has been a growing area of research in L1 studies, there is a need for more longitudinal research on L2 students' writing issues and their use of feedback as they make their way through this challenging and often alien environment. This is an especially important aspect of feedback to investigate further, considering the growing number of second language writers taking higher degrees in English medium universities.

Ma's paper is situated in the more widely investigated area of peer feedback. Peer response remains a popular source of feedback in the L2 classroom and a continuing area of interest for research. While there have been a large number of studies on student preferences and responses to peer feedback, Ma focuses on an aspect which has received less attention - the important area of student participation in the feedback process. She focuses on the decision-making processes of two Chinese EFL students as they evaluate their peer's texts. The decisions made by the two students in her study while deciding what to focus on when responding to the texts were influenced by factors such as previous learning and assessment experiences and the weaknesses of the papers. Ma's paper makes some interesting points about the importance of previous experience in understanding the factors that influence the decisions that students make when responding to their peer's writing, suggesting that training sessions may need to take into account students' previous learning experiences and especially their assessment experiences in high stakes tests like TOEFL. There is a need for more studies which investigate the students' perspective on feedback and the factors which influence their engagement both with each others' writing and with the feedback they receive from their teachers. Research could focus more on how learners interpret feedback and what factors influence their decisions about how they will use it. It is important to remember that learners are people who have agency and 'actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their learning' (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001: 145). The potential of feedback

will only be used if learners are willing and motivated to engage with it. Since this engagement and motivation is crucial for enabling students to learn and develop as writers after receiving feedback, it deserves further investigation through qualitative studies.

In the next paper, El-ebyary and Windeatt remind us of the growing research on the role of technology in language learning and, more specifically, on how innovations in this area can impact on feedback. Computer-mediated feedback and computer tools offer opportunities for new modes of feedback and open up new avenues for communication between teachers and students and between students themselves. However, investigations of the effectiveness of computer-mediated feedback are somewhat constrained by the very fast pace of developments in technology which can quickly render findings out of date. In addition we need to be aware that expensive and sophisticated software packages may not be widely available in some education contexts and may be too expensive in others (Tuzi, 2004). Nonetheless, technology does have applications in less than ideal teaching and learning situations like the Egyptian context described in El-ebyary and Windeatt's paper.

While early grammar checkers were often inflexible and provided confusing and rather prescriptive information, there have been significant developments in this area and programmes such as the *Criterion online writing service* (Burstein et al., 2004), offer the potential for integrated and systematic feedback on language problems. El-ebyary and Windeatt argue that automated feedback systems such as Criterion can help tutors to provide a source of useful and encouraging feedback to supplement teacher response. Their study adds weight to the need for more qualitative research in actual contexts. We often fail to consider the practical constraints of real-life contexts when recommending feedback practices. In the classroom described in their study, the number of students meant that giving detailed feedback to individuals was too time consuming. Therefore teachers had previously adopted coping strategies, providing feedback to a small sample of students and using this to demonstrate common problems to the entire class. By using the Criterion programme it was possible to provide individualized, regular and timely feedback to all students. While there were obviously still some issues with both the automated editing functions and the evaluation provided by Criterion, El-ebyary and Windeatt found it was very effective in encouraging students to revise their papers, generally resulting in improvements to the texts. The authors argue that the provision of such feedback was highly motivating to students and suggest that a hybrid form of feedback combining computer-generated feedback with teacher feedback may be the best option with different areas focused on by teacher and computer. This echoes a point made by DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, (2001) on peer feedback. They suggest that rather than thinking in terms of either one form or another, for online peer review to be most effective it may be best to combine it with traditional face-to-face peer review.

Other research also suggests that we do need to be aware of the limitations of computer-generated feedback. While scoring has been found to be generally reliable and automated feedback can be usefully used to provide a second or third rater for assessment

(Coniam, 2009), automated feedback does not provide reader response to writing; it is unable to appreciate humour or irony, and it cannot evaluate the degree to which ideas are relevant, appropriate and well argued in an essay. Thus automated feedback can't totally replace a human grader and is unlikely to do so in the near future.

This suggests that an important area for future research would be to investigate how computer-mediated feedback can best be utilised as part of a whole feedback system which includes both face-to-face and computer-mediated modes and both teacher and peer responders. In addition El-ebyary and Windeatt's paper reminds us of the importance of considering affective factors such as motivation when engaging students with electronic feedback. We should recognize that this form of feedback is not liked by all students, some of whom may experience computer anxiety (Matsumura and Han: 2004), while others may simply prefer the more personalized aspects of face-to-face interaction. Research needs to focus on investigating integrated feedback systems that take these factors into account. We should also recognize that many of the new generation of second language writers may be totally at ease with computer-mediated communication and may in fact prefer this form of feedback to the face-to-face mode, as it is a relaxed, flexible and routine means of communication between themselves and their peers.

The final study returns us to the links between mainstream SLA research and the issue of how written corrective feedback can contribute to learners' language development. Martínez and Roca de Larios have investigated both the role of output (Swain, 1995) and noticing (Schmidt, 1990) in a Spanish secondary school context, focusing on how the use of modelling feedback techniques can trigger noticing and reformulation of writing and thus enhance writing and revising. The results of their three-stage study of students composing a narrative based on pictures suggest that students, working as individuals or collaboratively in pairs, noticed mainly lexical problems at the writing stage, but could only find a few solutions to those problems. However, when they were offered two native-speaker models with which to compare their own writing to, they noticed their gaps, and selected both ideas and language to incorporate into subsequent revisions. Martínez and Roca de Larios found that learners working in collaborative pairs both noticed and used more features than learners working individually, suggesting that such models are best employed in group or pair activities if they are to enhance noticing.

Martínez and Roca de Larios make an important point that in many foreign language contexts no clear guidelines are given to teachers about providing feedback, so that they tend to rely on their own intuitions and previous experiences of feedback. This means they may fail to consider alternative feedback techniques like the modelling and reformulation strategies used in this study. If we consider feedback as an important teaching and learning tool, teacher training programmes and curriculum designers need to address feedback issues as part of their brief and offer training in this area by providing guidelines and a range of techniques for teachers to use in their classrooms. This is not to advocate a 'one size fits all'

system of feedback, but rather to suggest that novice teachers need to be made aware of the range of options which they can use when providing feedback and the possible benefits offered by these.

4. PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

These papers have suggested that future research in feedback needs to focus on a number of different areas. In the last section of this overview I would like to summarize some of the major areas which would benefit from further investigation and consider some pedagogic implications which can be drawn from the studies.

We are still exploring the ways that SLA theory can inform our corrective feedback practices and also how it can help us understand the cognitive processes that learners undergo when using written corrective feedback. The papers in this special issue of *IJES* suggest that there is further work to be done in this area, especially in terms of more longitudinal qualitative studies which focus on individual learners as they engage with feedback in naturalistic settings, tracing their development over a period of time. Such studies can adopt both cognitive and socio-cultural SLA frameworks to investigate the role of feedback in more depth. Much of the previous research on WCF has focused on the teacher's feedback and the students' revisions without considering what students bring to the feedback situation in terms of their own perceptions and understandings of feedback as well as their writing and feedback use strategies.

There has been very little research on how students actually engage with feedback and how feedback shapes their writing processes, revising practices and their self-evaluation capacities. Students need to engage purposefully and actively with feedback over a period of time if it is to achieve its full learning potential, but we have few studies which investigate this area. My case studies of second language writers in an academic context (Hyland, 1998, 2003) also highlighted the potential value of feedback to help learners to develop their autonomous writing skills and their own strategies for improving their writing. The two academic writing teachers who participated in my study tended to view student use of feedback as a fairly passive process, focusing on "fixing up" the texts in front of them when giving feedback, and doubting whether feedback could be "incremental", i.e. could be passed on to future pieces of writing. The student views were more developmental and focused on the whole process of learning to write academic discourse, seeing feedback's potential for enhancing their learning and improving their writing skills. Many studies do not give students enough credit for initiative and active participation in their own development. Students are capable of finding alternative sources of feedback outside the formal learning environment and they are able to use a variety of autonomous learning and writing strategies to engage with this feedback to enhance and improve their writing products and processes

(Hyland, 2003). We need more research which focuses on student engagement, looking at their motivation and the strategies these writers employ when using feedback.

Bitchener et al.'s study is situated in the higher education context and we need to remind ourselves that there is already a large body of research which has attempted to discover effective feedback practices in higher education; more links could be made between this research and research on feedback on second language learners in the academic context. One area where this is evident is in the development of students' self reflective skills in evaluating their writing. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) model of feedback in higher education contexts suggests a number of principles for good feedback including the facilitation of self assessment and reflection, vital to development of independent learners. An important issue for future L2 research is to elucidate what kinds of feedback practices can facilitate the development of the capacity of students to reflect, self regulate and evaluate their performance. The dilemma faced by teachers as they attempt to develop students' capacity for autonomy as writers and at the same time provide them with sufficient scaffolding and support is one which is central to feedback on second language writing.

Carless et al. (2010) have argued that 'sustainable' feedback practices designed to move students towards the development of self-regulation are needed and that these should be dialogic and multiple sourced and involve more technology-based advancement. They should also involve self- assessment and peer feedback as well as teacher feedback and should aim to raise students' awareness of standards, and their ability to self-monitor, set goals and plan their learning, and should encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. They should also facilitate engagement over time rather than being one-shot treatments. These principles for helping to develop writer autonomy in general can be applied to feedback on second language writing and could provide valuable areas for future investigation.

The ultimate aim of educational research is the generation of information that will enable educators to both understand their learners and their learning and to contribute to the improvement of pedagogy. The papers in this volume also suggest some important pedagogic implications for teachers of writing to second language learners. The papers suggest that teachers need to consider ways of involving students more fully in the process of using feedback in order to enhance its potential benefits. Teachers should help students to develop practices of feedback use which will scaffold and engage them as they develop their own self monitoring capabilities.

Evans et al.'s study suggests that teachers already have an awareness of ways in which feedback relates to SLA theories and the possible benefits and limitations of corrective feedback. However, as well as focusing on student needs and learning processes, we need to focus on teachers' development of knowledge about how to give effective feedback. Teacher training programmes could work to raise teachers' awareness of the different feedback sources and modes of delivery available to them and the possible ways of combining them to

make an effective support system. Such programmes could also make teachers more aware of the latest developments in computer-mediated feedback and the strengths and weaknesses of these systems, so that they understand the possible ways these can be combined with other sources to create an integrated and effective feedback system.

The papers in this volume make an interesting and thought-provoking contribution to research on feedback in second language writing and point the way forward for more socio-cultural research which moves from short-term feedback treatments to richer naturalistic investigations focusing on feedback within the whole context of learning and on the learner's role in interpreting and using feedback. This will help us to expand our knowledge and understanding of how different modes and sources of feedback can best contribute to the overall development of second language learners as independent self-reflective writers.

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