

The effectiveness of corrective feedback for L2 learners' acquisition of
referential article usage in writing tasks

Lisa Nicole Tyson
Old Dominion University
ENGL 679
December 10, 2016

The effectiveness of corrective feedback for L2 learners' acquisition of
referential article usage in writing tasks

Numerous studies investigating corrective feedback have been conducted in both the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Composition Studies, particularly second-language (L2) writing research. The results of such studies are far from conclusive and often downright contradictory. Ferris (2010) points out that the starting point of research from an SLA perspective is whether the corrective feedback results in acquisition, whereas L2 writing researchers are more interested in pedagogical concerns such as whether the corrective feedback results in more effective writing. One difficulty lies in defining and operationalizing such terms as *acquisition*, *effective* and *corrective feedback* as well, another in how to measure them once defined and operationalized. Conflicting results in the separate fields can somewhat be attributed to these different research questions and motivations (Ferris, 2010).

In order to investigate the question of what effect corrective feedback can have on L2 writing abilities, I will look at five empirical studies (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) with similar parameters. To better analyze these studies, I will first present some of the history of the written corrective feedback debate, a typology of corrective feedback as defined by Ellis (2008), and the definitions that will be used for specific terms. Although these studies are a beginning to a

better understanding of the effect corrective feedback can have on language acquisition, they are in no way conclusive evidence and more research is needed, particularly research that takes into account specific learner differences to explore their responses and implementations of the feedback they receive.

Debates in WCF research

Liu & Brown (2015) conducted a methodological synthesis of 32 published studies & 12 dissertations to attempt to determine where improvements to research design could assist in creating more consistent results within error correction research. They narrowed their focus to studies that investigate long-term gains in accuracy. The retention of the linguistic forms being corrected is what is important to study for any conclusions to be drawn about language acquisition. Liu & Brown (2015) found that while 95% of the studies included control and comparison groups, 86% also used pre-test/treatment/post-test experimental designs, but only 30% include a delayed post-test. Storch (2010) claims that the methodologies have swung too far in the direction of SLA traditions and do not consider learners' goals and attitudes. Ellis (2012) goes even further than this explaining that not only are learners' psychological dimensions at play, but social and cognitive dimensions as well. He suggests that without taking all these factors into account, it is impossible to tease apart the reasoning behind why

corrective feedback works when it does work. Ellis (2012) cautions that most likely there will never be a determination of the best form of corrective feedback, that, in fact, this is the wrong question to be asking. It is possible that even individual learners will differ on the corrective feedback that works best for them depending on the context: the error type and the task at hand. The studies (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) of corrective feedback on article usage therefore could only possibly determine a very narrow determination of the best strategies for the correction of rule-based usages.

Typology of corrective feedback

Ellis (2008) identifies a typology of written corrective feedback through “inspecting both teacher handbooks and published empirical studies” (p. 97-8). The specific kinds of feedback used in the studies to be examined are focused direct written corrective feedback, written metalinguistic explanation and oral metalinguistic explanation. However, Ellis (2008) indicates that the corrective feedback provided by a teacher is only useful if the student makes a decision to use their suggestions and that any explanation of corrective feedback should keep both aspects in mind.

Direct corrective feedback is when the teacher provides explicit corrections to an L2 writer's errors. This is especially helpful if the student has made an error and not simply a mistake that they may be able to self-correct once it has been pointed out to them. A disadvantage of this approach, according to Ellis (2008), is that because of the limited cognitive engagement in order to produce the correct form, it may not contribute as much to long-term learning that will result in acquisition. Oftentimes though, lower proficiency learners will benefit more from the direct approach than with indirect feedback.

There are various ways to implement indirect feedback. A teacher can either indicate the exact location of the error or indicate that there is an error on a particular line or within a particular paragraph or section of the writing. The reasoning behind this strategy being superior is that it requires a student to consider and process the linguistic reasoning behind their error and the correct choice. However, Ellis (2008) claims that the evidence of studies thus far has been mixed as to indirect feedback's superiority. Other forms of corrective feedback include electronic feedback where the student is provided with a concordance file with examples of correct usage, similar to using corpus data for instruction, and reformulation where the student's work is completely rewritten by a native speaker maintaining the content of the original text.

There needs to be a distinction drawn between written corrective feedback and corrective feedback pertaining to the product of writing. While the majority of feedback provided to students related to their writing is indeed in written form, there can also be oral metalinguistic feedback in the form of one-on-one conferences and mini-lessons on the subject of writing. Written metalinguistic feedback can be in the form of written error codes above an incorrect word or phrase or error codes in the margin such as: ww = wrong word; art = article (Ellis, 2008). The use of this system can sometimes be troublesome as a student would need to learn the code being used by the teacher and possibly different codes if they have more than one instructor. Another form of written metalinguistic explanation is numbering the errors in the text that refer to grammatical description at the bottom of the text.

An important distinction also needs to be made between focused and unfocused feedback. This is not the same meaning as the concept of form-focused feedback or instruction. It refers rather to the extent of the feedback or rather how many categories of errors are addressed by the teacher. Many studies in L2 writing research have recently started being critiqued for studying unfocused corrective feedback, while researchers are now starting to follow oral feedback investigation traditions drawn from SLA (Ellis, 2008).

Definitions of operationalized terms

Polio (2012) points out that the data collected to reflect a learner's acquisition varies between studies. Researchers vary in whether they require a student to revise a piece of writing or produce a new piece of writing. Bitchener & Knoch (2009) claim that no conclusions can be drawn from students' revisions and that completely new pieces of writing are required to determine whether acquisition has taken place. However, this also begs the question of what constitutes acquisition, whether a gain in accuracy is an indication of acquisition. This is also related to how the term effectiveness is operationalized. One of the difficulties in synthesizing results of studies on corrective feedback is the discrepancies in these definitions. The definitions of effectiveness range from immediate correct usage of a form to long-term retention of the correct usage of that form. According to Polio (2012), the defining of accuracy is not where the problem lies, but with how accuracy gains do or do not translate to acquisition. Accuracy can be defined quite simply as "the writer makes fewer errors" (Polio, 2012, p. 377). The only way to determine whether increased accuracy has become acquisition is to measure the accuracy longitudinally.

Studies focused on article usage

All of the experiments (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) in this section study the effects of form-focused direct written corrective feedback on intensive English language program students' usage of English articles in writing exercises. Most researchers in the field agree that some kind of corrective feedback is more beneficial than none at all, but which kinds are most helpful and to what extent is still unclear. These studies (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) are moving in the right direction to discover how effective written corrective feedback can be but much more research needs to be conducted before any real conclusions can be drawn.

Although focusing on one particular form can make it easier to conduct research, as it limits the variables, it can also limit the scope of the results. These studies all focus their research on English article usage. Four of the five studies (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) focus on anaphoric *the* and *a* as first mention, while Shintani & Ellis (2013) argue that *the* is generally acquired much earlier and that learners have a tendency to overgeneralize their usage of it. This makes it difficult to differentiate between the instances when they are actually applying knowledge of a grammatical rule and when it is just by chance. For this reason, they limit their study to the

indefinite article when used as a specific referent unknown to the hearer. English articles are difficult for second language learners because the choice of which one to use is partly determined by pragmatic factors. Sheen (2007) also explains that articles are often not explicitly taught past the beginning levels of language learning and that teachers even avoid correcting them as they are nonsalient and would require complicated rule explanations. Errors in article usage are also rarely the cause of communication issues. Hinkel (2004) likens their incorrect usage to the equivalent of a slight foreign accent and speech and asserts that many of the more esoteric article usages may never be fully acquired by L2 English users.

All the researchers (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) refer to SLA work that has been done on oral corrective feedback and propose the need for written corrective feedback research to follow suit to a certain extent. Part of the difficulty with this idea is that oral corrective feedback has no delay. It is done at the moment that the error occurs whereas written corrective feedback is always received later. Sheen (2007) points out that writing teachers are also concerned with macro-level concerns and the overall quality of a student's writing and may consider grammatical accuracy, especially on an issue such as correct article usage a secondary concern.

These researchers (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) all recognize the limitation of some previous research in

the field of written corrective feedback in writing, namely that there needs to be a control group. The reasoning of previous researchers is more one of ethics than a lack of scientific rigor in that it is unfair to deny students of instruction (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). However, these researchers (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) are able to more easily justify not teaching a group because of the fact that it is such a targeted error that is being studied. The control groups are simply not getting any feedback specifically related to article usage. Bitchener (2008) suggests possibly teaching the targeted error category to one class the first semester and to the group that was the control the next, though oftentimes this is not feasible.

Each study is form-focused, but they also all compare direct written corrective feedback to metalinguistic explanations in some way. Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener & Knoch (2010) have four groups, the control and a direct written corrective feedback with written and oral metalinguistic explanation, direct written corrective feedback with written metalinguistic explanation and direct written corrective feedback alone. Sheen (2007) has three, a control group and a direct written corrective feedback and a direct written corrective feedback with metalinguistic explanation group. Shintani & Ellis (2013) approach it a little differently; they have a control and a group that received only metalinguistic explanation in the form of a handout and a group that received direct written corrective feedback.

Each study (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) is interested in the acquisition of the targeted usages of the articles. Their subject pool and methodologies are similar though some of the differences could account for minor discrepancies in their respective findings. Shintani and Ellis's (2013) findings that the knowledge is not retained could be related to the fact that their subject pool is entirely students from L1 backgrounds that do not use articles. Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener & Knoch (2010) are careful to ensure that essentially equal numbers of students with article-using L1s are in each group. The only consistent finding across all studies is that students receiving corrective feedback outperform the no feedback control or comparison groups. While Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener & Knoch (2010) find no real difference in results between the types of feedback in their treatment groups, Sheen (2007) reports that students with direct written corrective feedback accompanied by metalinguistic explanation performed better longitudinally, while Shintani & Ellis (2013) found that only metalinguistic explanation helped students and only in the immediate posttest. Stefanou & Révész (2015) found that direct feedback alone was superior to no feedback but that the addition of metalinguistic information did not result in increased accuracy gains.

Each study (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015) used a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest model. They also all used picture prompts for the writing tasks and allowed students either a dictionary (Shintani & Ellis, 2013) or assistance through question to a teacher for specific vocabulary (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2010). It is important that all the language learners in these studies are low-intermediate level, excepting Sheen's (2007) who were intermediate, for purposes of comparison. Advanced learners would not yield the same results. Shintani & Ellis (2013) are the only researchers to use participants specifically from academic writing classes, but the other studies are of intensive English language programs for recently arrived students, between 3 months and 18 months in the United States (Sheen, 2007; Shintani & Ellis 2013) or Australia (Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch 2010), with the exception of the Stefanou & Révész (2015) study which was conducted in a foreign language context in a Greek high school. The reason for its inclusion in these comparisons is that it measures grammatical sensitivity and metalanguage awareness that relate to the language analytic ability tested by Sheen (2007). For language learning purposes the high-school-aged learners would be considered adult learners, though the fact that they have fewer years of formal instruction than the participants of the other studies could account for the differences in the results.

Language analytic abilities

The question of how a learner's innate abilities might affect their processing of metalinguistic feedback is an interesting one. Sheen (2007) used Ottó's (1998) language analysis test, which consists of fourteen multiple choice items of four choices of translations from a glossary of an artificial language and English translations, to measure language analytic ability defined by Skehan (1991) as a combination of grammatical sensitivity and inductive language learning ability. Stefanou & Révész (2015) used two separate tests, one for grammatical sensitivity which was an adapted words-in-sentences test modified from the MLAT where they had to match underlined word in one sentence to a choice of five in a separate sentence and one for metalanguage knowledge using an instrument where the students had to identify words and phrases that corresponded to 10 grammatical terms. Both researchers found a positive correlation between the learners with higher scores on these tests and their score increases indicating higher accuracy. Sheen (2007) found that the addition of the metalinguistic explanation further increased these gains while Stefanou and Révész (2015) did not notice any differences between the direct only and the direct and metalinguistic feedback groups.

Implications for further research

Though the findings in favor of direct corrective feedback on writing seem promising, researchers are still finding conflicting results for the long-term efficacy of it. The question of whether corrective feedback on writing assists students longitudinally to be able to transfer linguistic knowledge to implicit rather than explicit knowledge still requires many more studies. It is important, at this stage, to conduct focused research so that data can be more easily analyzed. However, students' differing attitudes, cultures and innate abilities also need to be considered in interpreting results of such studies.

References

- Bitchener, J. (2008). Evidence in support of written corrective feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17, 102-118.
- Bitchener, J. & Knoch, U. (2009). The value of a focused approach to written corrective feedback. *ELT Journal*, 63(3), 204-211.
- Bitchener, J. & Knoch, U. (2010). The contribution of written corrective feedback to language development: a ten-month investigation. *Applied Linguistics*, 31(2), 193-214.
- Bitchener, J. & Ferris, D.R. (2012). *Written corrective feedback in second language acquisition and writing*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ellis, R. (2009). A typology of written corrective feedback types. *ELT Journal*, 63(2), 97-107.
- Ellis, R. (2012). Cognitive, social and psychological dimensions of corrective feedback. In R. Batsone (ed.) *Sociocognitive Perspectives on Language Use and Language Learning*, (pp. 151-165). New York, NY: Oxford.
- Ferris, D.R. (2010). Second language writing research and written corrective feedback in SLA: intersections and practical applications. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 32, 181-201.
- Hinkel, E. (2004). *Teaching academic ESL writing: Practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Liu, Q. & Brown, D. (2015). Methodological synthesis of research on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 30, 66-81.

- Ottó, I. The relationship between individual differences in learner creativity and language learning success *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4), 763-773.
- Polio, C. (2012). The relevance of second language acquisition theory to the written error correction debate. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21, 375-389.
- Sheen, Y. (2007). The effect of focused written corrective feedback and language aptitude on ESL learners' acquisition of articles. *TESOL Quarterly* 41(2), 255-283.
- Shintani, N. & Ellis, R. (2013). The comparative effect of direct written corrective feedback and metalinguistic explanation on learners' explicit and implicit knowledge of the English indefinite article. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 22, 286-306.
- Skehan, P. (1991). Individual differences in second language learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 13, 275-298.
- Stefanou, C. & Revesz, A. (2015). Direct written corrective feedback, learner differences, and the acquisition of second language article use for generic and specific plural reference. *The Modern Language Journal*, 99(2), 263-282.
- Storch, N. (2010). Critical feedback on written corrective feedback research. *International Journal of English Studies*, 10(2), 29-46.

