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CONTROVERSIES IN THE ROLE OF WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

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Abstract:

Truscott has strongly opposed the use of written corrective feedback in second-language writing classes. According to Truscott, written corrective feedback generates pseudo-learning that has a significant impact on the L2 development of learners. In response, experts in Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Writing addressed his argument. This paper examines the debates surrounding the function of written corrective feedback in L2 writing.

Keywords:

Written Corrective Feedback, L2 Writing, Controversies

Introduction

Writing is seen as evidence of language proficiency in the target language (Buyukyavuz & Cakir, 2014). It improves the ability of second language (L2) learners to comprehend ideas and concepts (Voon Foo, 2007). However, for some L2 students, writing is a difficult skill to acquire (Mastan & Maarof, 2014). This has been demonstrated by research of challenges and difficulties faced by language learners when writing the target language (e.g., Busch, 2010; Chen, 2002; Daud, 2012; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Hisham, 2008). Teachers must provide feedback in the writing classroom because it helps students' development as writers (Ene &

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Kosobucki, 2016; Ferris & Robert, 2001; Gower, Philips & Walters, 1995; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Teachers must also ensure that students are actively engaged with the feedback provided, either orally or in writing, so that they understand and can comprehend the feedback for use in the revision or new piece of writing.

Corrective feedback as a tool to improve the writing accuracy of L2 learners is still contentious after decades of use. The dispute began when Truscott (1996) asserted that written or oral Corrective Feedback (CF) is detrimental to L2 writers and should be abandoned. His allegation was swiftly reacted to by scholars in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Second Language Writing (SLW) fields. Since then, numerous studies on the role of WCF have been undertaken and published as research articles, meta-analyses, scholarly summaries of the arguments on the topic, and responses/rebuttals to the research and arguments of other authors (Ferris, Liu, Sinha & Senna, 2013). Despite Truscott's opposition to WCF, a growing body of evidence suggests that WCF improves students' writing accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2010; Lee, 2013; Van Beuningen, 2010). Several studies also found evidence of WCF's effectiveness over time for specific linguistic structures (see Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009c; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008; Farid & Samad, 2012; Kao, 2013; Kassim & Ng, 2014b; Meihami, 2013; Mourssi, 2012; Razali & Jupri, 2014; van Beuningen, De Jong & Kuiken, 2012).

Written Corrective Feedback in L2 Writing

Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) refers to a written response to linguistic errors, most frequently grammatical errors, in a written text produced by an L2 student (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). It provides students with the WCF for their grammatical errors, so enhancing their ability to write accurately (Ferris, 2011). It is a common pedagogical strategy used in the L2 writing classroom and is a sort of written modality that can motivate students to apply language to develop knowledge about language itself.

In addition to linguistic error correction, WCF can also address lexical and non-grammatical issues such as punctuation and spelling. The corrections of errors detected in the writing of L2 students are always made after the text has been checked and graded, and the students are aware of the corrections because all WCF must be explicit (Sheen, 2010). To benefit from the WCF provided by their teachers, L2 learners must either rewrite the checked writing text based on the provided WCF (revision text) or study the WCF or receive the corrected writing text of the checked writing text from their teachers without having to write the revision text (Ellis, 2009).

WCF is still regarded as being crucial in L2 writing even though many researchers, including Krashen (1982, 1984), Santa (2006), and Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007), disagree with its application in writing classes. This is because WCF aids L2 learners in improving both their writing performance and their L2 learning (Ferris, 2010; Razali & Jupri, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Studies on WCF have demonstrated that WCF does improve the writing accuracy of L2 learners (see Forrester, 2014; Jerry, Mohd Jan & Samuel, 2013; Kassim & Ng, 2014b).

It is not sufficient, however, to merely offer WCF to L2 learners in the hope that it will improve their writing abilities because this will not produce the desired results. If these students merely replicate the WCF provided by their teachers, they will develop a passive learning style in

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which they are unable to identify or remedy their mistakes in the writing (Williams, 2003). Additionally, after receiving WCF from their teachers, L2 learners continued to make the same errors in their revision writing due to their limited English competence and lack of metacognitive skills (Silver & Lee, 2007). Students' writing problems can be attributed to a variety of factors, including insufficient English proficiency and ineffective use of writing skills by L2 learners (Hyland, 1998). Despite the WCF, L2 learners continue to make errors in their writing. Thus, it is critical for L2 learners to engage with the WCF provided by their teachers in order to improve uptake and retention (Lee, 2013) and to have a positive impact on their writings (Jerry, Mohd Jan & Samuel, 2013; Kassim & Ng, 2014b). However, for L2 students to successfully absorb and retain the corrections provided for subsequent written tasks, they must be aware of and process the WCF.

Debates on the Role of WCF in L2 Writing

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Second Language Writing (SLW) scholars continue to argue over the significance and correction of student writing errors. It is crucial for SLA scholars to explore the facilitative effects of WCF on the acquisition of specific L2 linguistic traits by L2 learners. On the other hand, for SLW scholars, it is essential to determine the role of WCF in enhancing the overall writing efficacy of L2 learners. Despite the fact that both groups of scholars examine similar phenomena (i.e., WCF), they do not share the same research interests. The SLA group is more interested in the impacts of WCF on learners' L2 verbal acquisition, whereas the SLW group is more interested in the effects of WCF on learners' L2 written texts. Due of these disparities, scholars from both groups have divergent opinions regarding the procedures and conclusions of the WCF study. According to Ferris (2010), L2 writing is a topic that has therefore transcended disciplinary borders and spawned a new field of study. It is important to emphasize that scholars of L2 writing may be motivated by different problems and affected by different philosophical and theoretical frameworks than SLA scholars.

Argument against WCF

Prior to the mid-1900s, empirical research on the role of WCF in L2 learning, writing process pedagogy, and SLA was sparse (Ferris, 2010). However, in the early 1990s, an increasing number of written materials, including books, editing handbooks, chapters in books, and journal articles, advocated the application of WCF in the writing process of L2 writing. Despite efforts to stress WCF's importance in L2 writing, it is asserted that WCF hinders learning. This assertation was stated by Truscott (1996), who is most likely the most vocal opponent of WCF practice in L2 writing. Numerous researchers have responded to Truscott's (1996) assertion. Truscott provides three primary arguments against error correction. According to Truscott (1996), there is no evidence that WCF ever assists L2 learners with their written texts. To make this assertion, he only cited four studies: Kepner (1991), Semke (1984), Sheppard (1992), and Robb et al. (1986). According to these findings, WCF does not help increased written precision. However, the validity and reliability of these studies' conclusions are questioned due to design and execution flaws (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 1999; Guenette, 2007; **v**an Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2012). Table 1 illustrates Truscott's referred studies on WCF.

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Table 1: Truscott's Referred Studies on WCF

Studies	Participants	Treatment	Control Group	Effectiveness
Kepner (1991)	60 intermediate Spanish FL	• Direct error correction • Content comments	Content Comments	No
Semke (1984)	141 German FL	• Direct error correction • Direct error correction plus content comments • Error codes	Content Comments	No
Sheppard (1992)	26 upper-intermediate ESL	• Direct error correction plus conference • Error codes	Content Comments plus conference	No
Robb et al. (1986)	134 Japanese EFL freshmen	• Direct error correction • Error codes • Highlighting • Marginal error totals	Marginal error totals	No

The constructs in Kepner's (1991) study were not fully defined: two treatment groups received direct error correction and content comments on their text, but no control group. Then there was no pre-test writing task to determine the learners' level of accuracy prior to treatment, raising the question of how the reported improvement was calculated if the two groups of students had the same level of accuracy (Ferris, 2003). Kepner collected eight sets of journal entries, but she only examined the sixth set for comparison purposes and did not examine the first set to determine the students' level of accuracy. Also criticized were the lack of information regarding the conditions and constraints under which the students completed the writing activity outside of class and the lack of control over the length of the journal entries.

The study by Semke (1984) was also critiqued for its ambiguous explanation of the research's constructs. Similar to Kepner's study, Semke's study has a number of design and execution flaws, such as the addition of the 'comments-on-content only' group as a control group (in addition to the three existing treatment groups); the use of a different measurement for the analysis of the so-called control group and the other three treatment groups; and the lack of replication (the control group was analysed based on the number of words that were written, but the other three treatment groups were analysed based on a ratio of the number of errors to the number of words written). The findings may have been influenced by the incentives offered to certain students (Guenette, 2007), which may have caused students in the treatment groups to write less to avoid producing too many errors.

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Like Kepner's and Semke's investigations, Sheppard's (1992) lack of explication of the study's constructs was criticized. Whether or not the 'comments-on-content' group may be recognized as the true control group was questioned in the study. Then, it was unclear whether the conference between the teacher and the students in the "comments-on-content" group omitted any discussion of challenges in comprehending meaning that may have been the result of a linguistic error. Also lacking were inter-rater reliability checks on data coding (Ferris, 2003, 2004). Robb et al. (1986) was an additional study on WCF that Truscott cited to bolster his position. According to Truscott (2007), the group that received minimal feedback in the form of the total number of errors per line should not be considered a control group because the information provided to this group was so limited that it had no effect on the accuracy of their writing.

In conclusion, Truscott should not have used the studies, notably those by Kepner (1991) and Semke (1984), because they do not provide a clear and detailed description of the studies' constructions. However, a "cautionary proviso" should be included before adopting the latter two studies (Sheppard and Robb et al.) as supporting evidence for his claim (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). In response to his argument to abandon error corrective feedback, many scholars from SLA and SLW did a study on WCF's effectiveness on L2 development.

Argument for WCF

The assertion made by Truscott (1996) that WCF hinders L2 learning and should be abandoned is rejected by many educators and scholars. Ferris (1999) was one of the first to respond to Truscott's (1996) claim and is one of the most outspoken opponents of it. Ferris (2011) asserts that it is unrealistic to expect L2 learners to produce free-error text because the process of SLA development takes time and happens in stages, and as they progress through these stages, they make mistakes that may be caused by interference from their first language (L1) or a lack of knowledge of the L2. The instructions given to students, which should be pertinent to their specific linguistic gaps, and the techniques they can use to avoid making these mistakes will determine how well their L2 structures grow. Additionally, as SLA takes time, L2 learners' accuracy could not be instantly increased. WCF's absence will therefore solely have an impact on L2 students' writing accuracy. Ferris (2011) presents four arguments in support of continuing written CF in response to Truscott's claim that the erroneous CF practice in the L2 writing class should be discontinued.

Many educators and academicians refute the claim made by Truscott (1996) that WCF hinders L2 learning and should be abandoned. Ferris (1999) was one of the first to respond to Truscott's (1996) claim and is one of its most vocal critics. Ferris (2011) contends that it is unrealistic to expect L2 learners to produce error-free text because the process of SLA development takes time and occurs in stages, and as they progress through these stages, they make errors that may be the result of interference from their first language (L1) or a lack of knowledge of the L2. The instructions provided to students, which should be tailored to their particular linguistic gaps, and the strategies they can use to avoid making these errors will determine how effectively their L2 structures develop. In addition, because SLA requires time, the accuracy of L2 learners cannot be improved immediately. The absence of WCF will therefore have an effect exclusively on the writing accuracy of L2 students. In response to Truscott's claim that the erroneous CF practice in the L2 writing classroom should be discontinued, Ferris (2011) provides four arguments in favour of continuing written CF.

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The first argument is that written CF helps L2 students enhance their writing accuracy. This is because L2 learners utilise written CF to amend and revise their writing texts. Studies indicate that L2 learners improve their writing accuracy when they revise and modify their writing texts using the written CF provided by their teachers. For example, Ferris (2006) investigated the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the WCF administered to 92 ESL students by three university ESL instructors. She found that eighty percent of the errors identified by teachers were successfully corrected. This demonstrates that students are attentive to their teachers' feedback and make an effort to integrate corrections into their revised writings. Similarly comparable were the findings of Fathman and Whalley's (1990) investigation. The study included four groups: a no-feedback group, a grammar-feedback group, a content-feedback group, and a grammar-content-feedback group. It was discovered that the revision text writing accuracy of the grammar-content-feedback group increased as teachers emphasized grammatical errors in their writing text. Ashwell (2000), Ferris and Roberts (2001), and Truscott and Hsu (2008) all discovered that the treatment group(s) performed significantly better on revision tasks than the control group(s) in their respective studies. They contrasted the success rate of revision between a treatment group that received error feedback and a control group that was required to modify or revise their texts without receiving teacher feedback.

Although the data demonstrate that written CF assists L2 learners in successfully rewriting or editing their texts (self-editing procedures), the researchers were criticized for not investigating the impact of written CF on new student texts. In other words, the research was questioned because the data showed no indication of an increase in the accuracy and efficacy of students' writing over time as a result of their ability to rewrite or revise previous writings. (Ellis et al. 2008; Truscott, 1996, 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008). In spite of this criticism, the empirical findings have made a significant contribution to the study of the impact of written CF on L2 learners' writing accuracy in revision texts.

Second, the fact that the accuracy of L2 learners' writing improves over time further demonstrates the durability of written CF. Truscott's (1996, 2007) observation regarding the lack of data regarding the positive effects of WCF on L2 learners' writing correctness over time has motivated other SLA and SLW scholars to conduct research on this topic (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2006; Ferris, 2010). The investigations, which can be classified as experimental design (conducted by SLA academics) and classroom inquiry (conducted by SLW researchers), have consistently shown that the writing accuracy of L2 students who received WCF improved over time. The experimental design studies (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007; Van Beuningan et al., 2012) demonstrate that when Corrective Feedback (CF) was more focused (limited to a few discrete categories, e.g., definite and indefinite articles), students receiving Error Feedback (EF) significantly outperformed those who did not receive post-test and delayed test.

Bitchener and Knoch (2010) conducted a 10-month comparative analysis of the same four feedback strategies. Each of the three treatment groups outperformed the control group, and there was no difference in terms of efficacy between the three treatment groups. This demonstrates that none of the provided WCF alternatives were superior to the others. Sheen (2007) also conducted a two-month study comparing the effectiveness of two forms of direct feedback: direct error correction alone and direct error correction with a written metalinguistic

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explanation. There is no discernible difference between the two feedback options on the immediate post-test revision test. Two months later, however, the delayed post-test demonstrated that written metalinguistic explanation and direct error correction were more effective than direct error correction alone.

Third, SLW academic research also demonstrated the positive effects of CF. In some instances, the research lacked a no-feedback control group, and in others, the results varied by individual student, writing task type/timing, and error type(s) assessed. (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995, 2006; Ferris et al., 2010). Ferris et al. (2010), for instance, conducted a qualitative case study with ten ESL students enrolled in a developmental writing course at an American institution. Each student's grade was based on up to four error patterns spanning four novels. They were provided time to revise their texts and were interviewed three times about their revision strategies and understanding of the feedback. All students improved in at least some error categories over time, and the combination of individually targeted written CF and in-person error discussion benefited both in-class and out-of-class writing (there was no control group in this study). In a study of 58 students in an advanced ESL composition course at a university in the United States, Foin and Lange (2007) found that treated or marked errors were effectively corrected in nearly 81 percent of cases, while unmarked errors were successfully corrected in 32 percent of cases. With the exception of two students, Ferris (1995) discovered that all of her students improved in at least some of the individually targeted error patterns over the course of the semester. Her findings, however, varied based on the type of error and writing task. Although SLA and SLW researchers took different approaches to design their studies, their findings have provided useful information about the impact of CF and methods to enhance it.

Next, teachers and L2 learners also value written CF. According to studies on the significance of written CF by students, L2 learners value their teachers' feedback on their errors. The feedback they receive assists them in enhancing their writing (e.g., Ferris, 1995, 2006; Ferris & Robert, 2001; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). However, Truscott (1996) contested the findings of these investigations. He argues that teachers should find a way to persuade students to accept the absence of error CF, even if students prefer to receive CF for the errors they have made. Truscott's suggestion will significantly impact the teacher-student relationship. Many teachers believe that CF is essential for their students and routinely provide it to them. Recent research on teachers' feedback approaches indicates that teachers continue to provide CF to their students (e.g., Ferris, 2011; Lee, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). In accordance with this, it is recommended that additional research be conducted to determine the best effective method for teachers to deliver CF to students (Bruton, 2009; Evan et al., 2010; Hartshorn et al., 2015).

Furthermore, in order for L2 learners to function in the real world, writing accuracy is crucial. Written CF is one of the ways to improve students' writing accuracy in L2 writing because studies of the effect of written CF on L2 learners' writing accuracy show positive effects despite the types of CF studied (Ferris, 1995). Teachers need to find the best ways to help their students become "independent self-editors" of their work. For instance, Ferris (2006) examined the effects of corrective feedback on the writing errors of 92 ESL students. From the first draft of the writing text to the final draft, he discovered that the number of errors had been greatly reduced. Saadi and Saadat (2015) found that the effect of direct and indirect corrective feedback on writing accuracy favoured post-tests significantly. Chen and Li (2009) discovered that direct CF has a greater impact on students' writing accuracy than indirect CF. Almasi and Tabrizi

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(2016) discovered a similar outcome when the group receiving immediate feedback considerably exceeded the other groups in terms of writing accuracy. Wang and Hu (2010) discovered that the provision of indirect CF affects students' writing accuracy, even if the students were not given teacher CF. The indirect CF group outperformed the direct CF group in terms of accuracy improvement for total errors (Khodareza & Delvand, 2016). These studies demonstrate that CF has a considerable impact on the writing accuracy of L2 learners. In the real world, writing accuracy is critical. Studies have shown that in some contexts, college lecturers and employers perceive linguistic errors in writing to be distracting and stigmatizing (e.g., Beacon, 2001; Janapolous, 1992; Vann, Lorenz & Meyer, 1991). The failure of students to write accurately may impair the clarity and coherence of their written text, and they may be labelled as incompetent language users, that might impede their college and employment success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the studies discussed in the preceding paragraphs provide clear examples of the arguments that to enhance L2 learners' (especially low proficiency learners) writing accuracy, teachers need written CF because it is crucial and plays a large part in the process of language learning. In addition, students place a high value on CF provided by teachers and prefer to have their errors corrected by teachers (Herrera, 2011). Therefore, the abandonment of this practice will have a substantial effect on both the teaching and learning of second-language writing.

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