

TIRF Priority Research Grant

Title of proposed project: *The Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on ESL and EFL Learners' Acquisition of Grammatical Forms*

Topic: Written corrective feedback

Applicants:

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Detailed proposal

Introduction

The proposed research addresses two of the issues suggested in the TIRF Call for Research Proposals:

- Classroom research demonstrating the successful integration of grammar instruction in various kinds of English language curricula for adults.
- Effective approaches to the instruction and correction of grammar embedded in its discourse context that lead to students' acquisition of appropriate language forms in speech or in writing

The purpose of the study is to investigate experimentally the effects of written corrective feedback (CF) on adult ESL and EFL learners' acquisition of grammar. Focused corrective feedback constitutes an ideal means of integrating grammar instruction into a writing curriculum. It also ensures that grammar is addressed in relation to discourse context.

The effectiveness of corrective feedback on learners' writing is a matter of controversy (cf. Truscott 1996, 1999 and Ferris 2002). One position is that CF only leads to L2 explicit knowledge (not implicit knowledge) and thus has only a very limited effect on learners' writing, which draws primarily on implicit knowledge. An alternative position is that CF does contribute to the development of implicit knowledge (either directly or indirectly) and thus will have a demonstrable effect on the accuracy of learners' writing.

There are now a substantial number of studies that have investigated the effects of oral CF on L2 acquisition. Nicholas et al. (2001), Long (forthcoming), and Ellis and Sheen (forthcoming) have provided reviews of the research on one type of CF -recasts. In general, the recast studies have shown that this type of feedback can have a beneficial effect on acquisition, especially when the recasts are more explicit in nature (as in Doughty & Varela, 1998). A number of other studies have demonstrated that explicit feedback is of value. Carroll, Roberge, and Swain (1992), for example, found that a group that received explicit corrective feedback directed at two complex French noun suffixes (*-age* and *-ment*) outperformed a group that received no feedback, although no generalization of learning to nouns not presented during the treatment occurred. Other studies have compared the effects of different types of feedback (especially implicit and explicit types). Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) provide a review of these studies. Overall, the results point to an advantage for explicit over implicit CF, especially in studies in which the treatment involved free production. Ellis et al's own study also found in favour of explicit, metalinguistic feedback and also demonstrated that this advantage was evident in a measure of implicit as well as explicit L2 knowledge.

There are some obvious differences between written and oral CF. The former is delayed whereas the latter occurs immediately after an error has been committed. Written CF imposes less cognitive load on memory than oral CF, which typically demands a cognitive comparison on-line, thus requiring learners to rely heavily on their short-term memory. Written CF is also different pedagogically. Writing teachers are often involved in trying to improve content and organization while focusing on the overall quality of students' writing, in which case accuracy is often a secondary issue. On the other hand, a teacher's provision of oral CF typically draws learners' attention to their linguistic errors..

These differences however do not obviate the need for writing researchers to address the same question as SLA researchers have addressed in studies of oral CF. That is, they need to know whether written CF assists L2 acquisition – for example by investigating whether it helps students to improve written accuracy over time. This issue is of importance both to SLA and writing researchers but, at present, there is no clear answer because past research has failed to provide unambiguous evidence of the effectiveness of written CF (see Ferris, 2004 for a comprehensive and influential discussion of this issue).

The proposed study is an extension of Sheen's (forthcoming) study of the effects of written CF on the acquisition of English articles. In this study, Sheen compared the effects of two kinds of CF – direct CF (i.e. provision of the correct form) and direct plus metalinguistic CF (i.e. provision of the correct form together with a metalinguistic explanation). In contrast to previous studies of written CF, which have failed to show convincingly that correction leads to acquisition (as measured in either post-tests or subsequent pieces of writing), Sheen's results demonstrated that both types of CF resulted in statistically significant gains in post-tests, with the direct plus metalinguistic CF generally outperforming the direct only CF. Sheen's study investigated the effects of focused CF (i.e. she corrected errors relating to a single grammatical structure). It is possible therefore that the positive effect she reported was due to this. In other words,

written CF works when it is intensive and concentrated on some specific linguistic problem. In this respect, Sheen's study replicates the methodology and results of a number of studies of oral CF (e.g. Han 2002; Lyster 2004).

The proposed study is predicated on the assumption that L2 writing researchers can benefit from borrowing from the methodology of oral CF research in SLA. It seeks to investigate whether the distinction between focused written CF and unfocused written CF (i.e. feedback directed at a range of different errors) can account for the effect CF has on acquisition.

Research questions:

1. What effect does a) unfocused correction and b) focused correction have on learners' acquisition of English grammatical forms?
2. Is there any difference in the effect of unfocused correction and focused correction on learners' acquisition of English grammatical forms?
3. What effect does a) direct correction and b) metalinguistic feedback have on learners' acquisition of English grammatical forms?
4. Is there any difference in the effect of direct correction and metalinguistic feedback on learners' acquisition of English grammatical forms?
5. Is there any interaction effect between approach (unfocused vs. focused) and corrective feedback strategy (direct vs. metalinguistic)?

Definition of terms:

'unfocused correction' – correction that is directed at a wide range of errors that learners make in their writing

'focused correction' – correction that is directed at specific, predetermined errors that learners make in their writing.

'direct correction' – provision of the correct target language form where learners have made an error

'metalinguistic feedback' – provision of metalinguistic clues that will enable learners to self-correct their own errors.

Design

The design takes the form of a quasi-experimental study using intact classes with a pre-test, treatment, immediate post-test and delayed post-test.

The study will investigate the role of two approaches to corrective feedback in ESL and EFL learners written compositions:

1. Unfocused corrective feedback (i.e. a range of errors are identified and corrected). This approach corresponds to the traditional approach to correcting students' written work.

2. Focused corrective feedback (i.e. errors in a specific grammatical structure will be targeted for identification and correction). This approach corresponds to that found in most studies of oral CF.

Two corrective feedback strategies will be employed:

1. Direct correction (i.e. the correct target language form will be provided).
2. Metalinguistic feedback (i.e. metalinguistic clues relating to the nature of the errors will be provided but the correct target language form will not be supplied).

These two CF strategies can be distinguished in two ways; the provision or non-provision of the correct form and the extent to which learners have to work out the correct form for themselves.

The effects of these two approaches and strategies of CF will be investigated in a longitudinal, experimental design as follows:

	Unfocused CF	Focused CF
Direct CF	Group 1	Group 2
Metalinguistic CF	Group 3	Group 4
Control Group	Group 5 Completes treatment tasks (including revision of initial draft) but with no correction.	

Each experimental group will receive treatment over a one month period. In the case of Groups 1 and 2 (unfocused CF) a range of errors produced in a weekly written composition will be corrected. In the case of Groups 3 and 4 (focused correction) one specific grammatical structure will be targeted; articles. A control group will complete the pre-test and post-tests and also complete the writing tasks but will not receive any feedback.

Care will be taken to ensure that none of the groups receives any explicit instruction or practice relating to the target structures during the data collection period.

Choice of target structure

Articles have been selected as the target structure for three principal reasons; (1) all learners (even advanced ones), irrespective of their L1, make errors in the use of articles in their written work, (2) errors in articles can be reliably identified from the written context and (3) it is relatively easy to design writing tasks that will make the use of these structures 'essential' or, at least, 'natural' (Loschky and Bley Vroman 1993).

Note: This structure will constitute the target for both the unfocused and focused groups. However, the unfocused groups will receive corrective feedback on a range of errors that will include the target structures whereas the focused groups will receive corrective feedback exclusively on the target structure.

Participants

It is envisaged that the study will be carried out in two research sites. One site will be a community college in the New York area. Learners in this site will be adult intermediate level ESL learners from a variety of language backgrounds. The second site will be a university in Tokyo. Learners in this site will be first (or second) year Japanese university college students taking general English classes. These learners will be EFL learners from a single language background (Japanese).

Instruments

General

All students will complete a general questionnaire eliciting background information relating to gender, L1, number of years spent in an English speaking environment, number of years of instruction in English etc.

In addition students will complete a test of their metalinguistic knowledge (Ellis 2005). This is considered necessary as the extent to which students are familiar with metalinguistic terms may act as mediating variable in the study.

Writing Tasks

The writing tasks used in the study will be reconstruction tasks. These are chosen because they enable the researcher to create contexts for the use of the target structure. The tasks are also chosen to elicit two rhetorical modes (narrative and exposition) that commonly figure in composition courses.

In the first task, students will listen to their teacher read a story. They will be allowed to take notes. They will then work in groups to reconstruct the story from their notes. Finally, each student will be asked to write out the story individually.

In the second task, students will read a short expository text, selected to contain instances of different uses of articles. The procedure will be the same as for the first task.

It should be noted that the tasks have been designed to reflect current thinking regarding the importance of collaboration in writing instruction. That is, they are pedagogically valid as well as serving as effective research tools.

Tests

The following tests will be used:

1. An error correction test. This will test a variety of grammatical structures, including the target structure. It will consist of a number of sentences containing

- typical errors. Students will be asked to identify the errors and write out the sentences correctly. Two versions of this test will be prepared.
2. A picture description test. Students will be given a picture composition and asked to write out the story.
 3. An expository writing test. Students will be given information in the form of a graph or table and asked to use this information to write a short expository text.
 4. A metalinguistic knowledge test. This will be based on parts of the test designed by Alderson et al (1997), i.e. learners will be asked to read a short text and then to find examples of named grammatical features from the text and also to label grammatical parts in a set of sentences. This test will be designed to measure learners' knowledge of key metalingual terms relating to the target structure (e.g. 'indefinite article' and 'uncountable noun').

Procedures

Corrective feedback

The students' completed texts will be collected in and errors corrected in accordance with the corrective feedback treatment for each group.

Unfocused CF:

Between 3 and 5 errors in each student's composition will be corrected – even if there are many more errors. The errors corrected will include one (or possibly two) error in the target structure. In other words, care will be taken to ensure that the majority of the errors corrected do not relate to the target structure.

Focused CF:

Only errors in the target structure will be corrected.

Direct correction:

The error will be underlined and the correct target form written above it.

Metalinguistic feedback:

The error will be underlined and a number written over the error (i.e. (1), (2), (3) etc.). Underneath the composition metalinguistic clues corresponding to each numbered error will be provided (e.g. 'The noun is uncountable so you can't use an indefinite article'). Metalinguistic feedback will consist of complete statements (as in the example above) and will not involve the use of an error correction code (e.g. IndA for 'error in use of indefinite article').

The corrected compositions will be given back to the students as soon after the original lesson as possible. Students will be asked to write out their composition correcting the errors. The corrected version will also be collected.

Testing

Students will complete the four tests one week before the treatment starts. Immediately after completion of the treatment they will complete the error correction test and the two writing tasks. Two weeks later they will complete all the tests (including the metalinguistic test) a third time.

Two versions of the tests will be developed and counterbalanced at each time of administration (i.e. split halves of each group will complete version A and version B for the pre-test, the reverse for the immediate post-test and the same as for the pre-test in the delayed test).