The Relationship between Metalinguistic Knowledge, Error Type, and Explicitness in L2 Written Corrective Feedback

Dan Brown

Northern Arizona University

Abstract

Despite a growing body of research investigating the effects of written corrective feedback on grammatical accuracy in second language writing, controversy continues as to what extent various types of WCF help L2 student writers to develop their accuracy. Recent meta-analytic studies have suggested advantages for direct (i.e., supplying corrections) over indirect techniques (i.e., marking the location of errors often accompanied by a code labeling error types) in promoting long-term development in accuracy. Few studies have investigated the relationship between learners' grammatical knowledge or metalinguistic awareness across individual error types and the efficacy of different types of feedback in promoting long-term development in accuracy. The current study examines effectiveness of direct and indirect feedback across individual error types relative to learners' explicit metalinguistic knowledge and implicit procedural knowledge of individual grammar features. Initial results suggest that efficacy of indirect vs direct feedback is moderated by learners' understanding of the grammar associated with error types, suggesting that a mixed-approach might be optimal for long-term development.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, L2 writing, metalinguistic knowledge, feedback type

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Background

Despite hundreds of published studies investigating written corrective feedback (WCF) on grammatical accuracy in second language (L2) writing, controversy continues as to whether and to what extent various types of WCF help L2 student writers to develop their accuracy. Recent meta-analytic studies have shown evidence in support of the effectiveness of WCF in promoting accuracy in students' writing (Biber, Nekrasova, & Horn, 2011; Kang, 2013; Russell & Spada, 2006), pointing towards an advantage for direct methods (i.e., supplying students with the correct forms) over indirect methods (i.e., indicating the location and/or type of error for students, often through use of a code). The opinion of several researchers, teachers, and students, however, support the use of indirect CF because it is claimed to encourage students' analytic reflection, engagement, and processing of the feedback they receive (Ferris, 2010, 2011). In one of the few longitudinal classroom-based studies investigating teachers' CF strategies and student progress over time it was found that while direct correction led to higher percentage of correct short-term revision, greater gains were found in long-term written accuracy as a result of indirect feedback (Ferris, 2006). Several researchers have hypothesized variables that may moderate the effectiveness of direct vs indirect methods, including proficiency, the nature of the errors (e.g., 'treatability' of error types hypothesizing that some error types more conducive to rule-based explanation may benefit form indirect methods), and pedagogical focus (Ferris, 2011; Russel & Spada, 2006), although little empirical research supports these claims.

A few studies have examined the effectiveness of metalinguistic explanation accompanying direct CF (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007), and one

study measured students' self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in accuracy across error types (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). None, however, have measured the metalinguistic knowledge that students bring to a writing classroom and how that awareness may interact with the effectiveness of the type of feedback they receive. In practice, I argue that teachers make use of a mixed approach of direct/indirect CF relying on intuitive judgment based on a number of factors as to which CF type will benefit students for each particular instance while proving feedback. The influence of students' metalinguistic awareness on efficacy relative to the explicitness CF remains a gap in this line of research.

Research Questions

In an effort to help inform practitioners in how and when WCF can help L2 student writers, the proposed study will investigate two potential moderators of development in grammatical accuracy as a result of the explicitness (direct or indirect) of WCF. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the relative amenability across different error types in response to direct vs indirect feedback methods?
2. What is the relationship between learners' metalinguistic awareness of error types in response to direct vs indirect methods?

Testing Ferris' 'treatability hypothesis (2002), I expect that some error types are more effectively treated using indirect CF when sufficient metalinguistic awareness is present, while direct methods may prove more effective when learners lack the metalinguistic awareness to make sufficient sense of coded feedback.

Methods

The pilot study involved an intervention of WCF in three L2 writing classes: one

receiving indirect CF using a code, another receiving direct correction, and a third as a control group receiving no feedback on grammar. The participants of the pilot study include three groups of ENG 105 PIE students (advanced L2 writers), with limited class sizes of 9-14 students in each section. Students in the two treatment groups received WCF on their daily in-class writings, (about 15 ten minute writings). Upon receiving their writing journals back with feedback each week, provided by the researcher, students were instructed to attend to the feedback and make corrections. In addition to daily in-class writings, the first drafts of students' three major writing assignments were analyzed to investigate effects across writing types (timed vs untimed writing). Curricular constraints did not allow for feedback to be given on the formal out-of class writings, but I hope to include feedback on all writing types in future iterations of the study.

The rationale for the selection of the error types to examine include the following criteria:

- Rule-governed (non-idiomatic) error categories that draw on metalinguistic knowledge to correct. (descriptively accessible)
- Highest raw frequency single error types from past level 5 writings
- Well-represented error types from existing WCF studies (that have been studied in both direct and indirect CF studies)
- 8-10 types (limited range to help students understand and recognize the types.

Nine error types were selected for examination, which include morphological (subject-verb agreement, singular-plural agreement, verb tense), syntactic (comma splice, fragment, run-on sentences), and lexical error types (articles, part of speech, and prepositions).

The instrument used to measure students' metalinguistic awareness incorporated a pre- and post-test design. Accuracy in student writing was tracked over the course of a semester

within in-class writings and first drafts of formal writing assignments. Effect sizes of the treatment for each error type, measured in terms of gains in accuracy in new writings over time, are compared between treatment groups and relative to learners' metalinguistic awareness of each error category.

Results

Results are currently being analyzed.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

L2 teachers have received little guidance from research to date on how and when to provide the most effective CF for their students to develop their writing ability. Future efforts may reveal that developmental readiness plays an important role in the effectiveness of WCF. Until computer-assisted techniques can automate CF that is tailored to students individual needs based on diagnostics (i.e., developmental readiness across errors types), teachers need more detailed guidance to perform this central task in L2 writing classrooms. I hope this study will result in a practical instrument teachers can use to assess their students' meta-linguistic knowledge in order to fine-tune their feedback techniques as well as raise students' awareness of their grammar knowledge and ability.

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