

Corrective Feedback and its Influence on L2 Learners' Performance

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This article examines the role of corrective formative feedback on learning and achievement of the Greek language students at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. Many recent studies have dealt with the question whether the corrective feedback has any influence on learners' uptake and better acquisition of a language.

Since 1996 when Truscott's review about CF appeared, there has been a debate about his controversial claim that written CF is ineffective and even harmful for SLA. Many counterarguments and empirical studies (e.g., Chandler, 2004; Ferris, 1999, 2004) after that have shown that CF can be very effective in acquiring a foreign language.

Corrective feedback and second/ foreign language acquisition

The aim of this article is to examine the connection between corrective feedback and learners' uptake during oral classroom work as well as written corrective feedback in translation classes. In order to explain the usefulness of corrective feedback, we will first give the definition of it. As Panova and Lyster (2002: 573) observe, *corrective feedback* refers to "any reaction of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance" (Chaudron, 1977:31) while the *uptake* refers to different types of student responses immediately following the feedback, including responses with repair of the non-target items as well as utterances still in need of repair (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Corrective feedback could be direct and indirect, depending on the way it is given to the students. Bitchener (2008:105) says that direct corrective feedback may be defined as the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure above or near the linguistic error (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 2003). It may include the crossing out of an unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme, or the provision of the correct form or structure. Additional forms of direct feedback may include written meta-linguistic explanation (the provision of grammar rules and examples at the end of a student's script with a reference back to places in the text where the error has occurred) and/or oral meta-linguistic explanation (a mini-lesson where the rules and examples are presented, practiced, and discussed; one-on-one individual conferences between teacher and student or conferences

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between teacher and small groups of students). It actually occurs when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form.

On the other hand, indirect corrective feedback indicates that in some way an error has been made. This may be provided in one of four ways: underlining or circling the error; recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line; or using a code to show where the error has occurred and what type of error it is (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986 in Bitchener et al. 2005: 193).

Rather than the teacher providing an explicit correction, students are left to resolve and correct the problem that has been drawn to their attention. Indirect strategies refer to situations when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but does not provide a correction, thereby leaving the student to diagnose and correct it. Additionally, there is further distinction between implicit corrections that do or do not use a code. Coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, and the type of error involved is indicated with a code. Uncoded feedback refers to instances when the teacher underlines an error, circles an error, or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error (Bitchener et al. 2005: 193).

Direct vs. indirect corrective feedback

In earlier years, a stronger case had tended to be made for the special value of providing students with indirect feedback rather than direct feedback. Lalande (1982) and James (1998) explained that indirect feedback requires learners to engage in guided learning and problem solving and, therefore, promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition. But as SLA researchers of oral L2 production have found, learners must first “notice” (Schmidt, 1990) that an error has been made. Once the error has been noted, indirect feedback has the potential to push learners to engage in hypothesis testing—a process which Ferris (2002) and others (see Doughty & Williams, 1998) suggest may induce deeper internal processing and promote the internalization of correct forms and structures (Bitchener 2008:105).

While not dismissing the value of indirect feedback, Bitchener (2008:105) says that those more in favour of a direct approach have explained that teachers and students prefer direct feedback (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Komura, 1999). In addition, they suggest that direct feedback reduces the kind of confusion that can result when students fail to understand or remember the meaning of error codes used by teachers. This can easily occur with lower proficiency learners, while they do not have enough knowledge in skills to decide how to solve

the problem. It has also been pointed out that students sometimes feel that indirect feedback does not provide them with sufficient information to resolve more complex errors such as idiosyncratic and syntactic errors. Chandler (2003) explained that the greater cognitive effort expended when students are required to use indirect feedback to make their own corrections is offset by the additional delay in knowing whether their own hypothesized correction is in fact correct. Weighing up the relative merits of the various claims is not possible, however, unless the findings of well-designed empirical studies are considered.

However, empirical evidence to date suggests that there is no advantage for indirect CF over direct CF (Chandler, 2003; Lalande, 1982; Robb et al., 1986). In fact, Chandler found that direct correction was superior to other types of indirect correction in producing more accurate writing. Chandler hypothesized that a teacher's direct correction helps students internalize the correct form in a more productive way because indirect feedback, though it demands greater cognitive processing, delays confirmation of students' hypotheses. She also reported that her students favored direct correction. These findings suggest that contrary to pedagogical suggestions in the L2 writing literature (e.g., Ferris, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005), indirect written CF may not be superior to direct CF. This conclusion is also supported by SLA research on oral feedback, which provides evidence that explicit feedback facilitates acquisition better than implicit feedback (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006) (Sheen 2007: 259).

Second language teaching and form-focused instruction

The pedagogical approach of form-focused instruction to second language teaching can be regarded as a modification of communicative language teaching, whose proponents believed that comprehensible input and meaning oriented tasks were necessary and sufficient for language acquisition. When it became evident that second language learners could not achieve high levels of grammatical competence from entirely meaning-centred instruction (Swain 1988; Lyster 1994; Lightbown and Spada 1999), applied linguists suggested that learners should also attend to form (Long 1991; De Keyser 1998; Norris and Ortega 2000; Ellis 2001; Housen and Pierrard 2005).

The term 'form' includes the function that a particular structure performs. Form-focused instruction, henceforth FFI, can be of two types: Focus on Form (FonF) and Focus on Forms (FonFs). The first is a pedagogical approach defined by Long as drawing learners' attention to linguistic elements during a communicative activity. Focus on Forms, on the other hand, is an approach equated with the 'traditional' method, which entails teaching discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons in a sequence determined by syllabus writers.

According to Ellis (2001), in a FonFs approach, students view themselves as learners of a language and the language as the object of study; in FonF, on the other hand, learners view themselves as language users and language is viewed as a tool for communication. The notion of FFI was developed in the context of grammar learning, but it can be extended to vocabulary as well. Thus, learners' attention can be drawn to lexical items (single words and multi-word units) within a communicative task environment if these lexical items are necessary for the completion of a communicative, or an authentic language task (Laufer, Girsai 2008: 694,695).

Written vs. oral corrective feedback

There is now growing evidence that oral CF, as a focus-on-form technique, facilitates interlanguage development, although there is less consensus about the effects of different types of oral CF. L2 writing researchers can benefit from examining the methodology of oral CF research in SLA. Sheen (2007: 256) explains that the previous studies have typically compared outcomes in terms of overall improvement across a number of different grammatical structures, whereas studies of oral CF in SLA (e.g., Han, 2002; Lyster, 2004) have focused on a specific grammatical feature and measured acquisition in terms of that feature. The SLA research suggests that intensive CF that repeatedly targets a single linguistic feature can have a beneficial effect on interlanguage development (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Han, 2002; Iwashita, 2003; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998 in Sheen 2007).

There are, however, some obvious differences between written and oral CF. Written CF is delayed whereas oral CF occurs immediately after an error has been committed. Written CF imposes less cognitive load on memory than oral CF, which typically demands an immediate cognitive comparison, thus requiring learners to heavily rely on their short-term memory. Written CF is also different pedagogically. Writing teachers often try 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 erroneous utterances as they arise in communicative activities. These differences may explain why, in contrast to the SLA research that in general has shown that oral CF is effective, L2 writing researchers have not been able to convincingly demonstrate that written CF leads to improvement in grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing. However, another reason that the results of SLA research into CF contrast with the results of L2 writing research into CF may lie in the methodologies used by writing researchers (Sheen 2007: 256, 257).

Teaching and learning translation: cross-linguistic FFI

Laufer & Girsai (2008: 697) hypothesize that, similarly to grammar, L2 vocabulary teaching will benefit from cross-linguistic form-focused instruction which entails comparison with L1 and translation. Such an approach to vocabulary teaching can be justified in terms of several hypotheses that explain effectiveness in L2 learning in general: ‘noticing’, ‘pushed output’, and ‘task-induced involvement load. It can also be justified by work in contrastive semantics, psycholinguistics, error analysis, and corpus analyses of learner language, work that demonstrates the pervasive influence of L1 on L2 vocabulary learning.

There is empirical evidence that output tasks have been more effective than input tasks for learning new words (Ellis and He 1999; De la Fuente 2002 in Laufer & Girsai 2008). Translation into L2 is a manifestation of pushed output. In order to translate, the learner is required to produce language, but unlike in the case of free production, the learner cannot produce a good translation if s/he avoids problematic words or structures. Hence, translation should be at least as effective as other pushed output tasks for learning vocabulary (Laufer, Girsai 2008: 698).

Additional justification for incorporating translation tasks into vocabulary learning is provided by earlier research in contrastive semantics and error analysis, and later corpus studies and psycholinguistic experiments (Laufer, Girsai 2008: 699).

Sometimes L1 concepts are identical to the concepts represented by the new L2 words, resulting in a correct translation of the learner. However, since different languages do not have entirely identical conceptual systems, many L2 words based on L1 meanings may not be identical in all semantic properties, that is have no exact translation equivalents...In order to use the L2 word with its correct specifications, a process of semantic restructuring must occur in which the learner readjusts the semantic knowledge of the word that s/he possesses to that of the native speaker (Laufer, Girsai 2008: 699).

Wolter (2001, 2006) extends the idea of relating L2 words to L1 concepts to the issue of lexical combinations. He suggests that learners draw upon L1 conceptual knowledge when making assumptions about connections between L2 words and that this knowledge will sometimes provide learners with misinformation about allowable combinations of L2 words. Thus, a learner who produces unusual collocations or combinations of words in the L2 is probably relying too heavily on L1 collocational knowledge. Collocational errors can occur even when learners are familiar with both of the words that comprise the correct collocation. (Laufer, Girsai 2008:699).

Form-focused instruction as a corrective feedback

To our knowledge, no research has examined the value of contrastive FFI of vocabulary, such as interlingual comparisons with learners' L1, or translation. By contrastive FFI, we do not refer to bilingual glosses which simply state the meaning of L2 words, but to the kind of instruction which leads to learners' understanding of the similarities and differences between their L1 and L2 in terms of individual words and the overall lexical system.

With the growth of interest in transfer studies and crosslinguistic influence since the 1980s (e.g. Gass and Selinker 1983; Odlin 1989), we could have expected to see an increased interest in researching the connection between overcoming learning difficulties and heightening the learners' awareness to the differences between L1 and L2 that were causing them. Moreover, since providing cross-linguistic information is a clear case of focus on form, or forms (depending on whether it is provided within a communicative task, or not), it seems natural that FFI research should extend to cross-linguistic instruction. Such research has been conducted in the area of grammar. The results showed that providing learners with cross-linguistic information proves to be effective in the instruction of some selected structures (Kupferberg and Olshtain 1996; Sheen 1996; Kupferberg 1999; Ammar and Lightbown 2005) (Laufer, Girsai 2008: 696, 697).

In order to prove the importance of corrective feedback and form-focused instruction and their role in second language acquisition, we tried to show the learning benefits of contrastive analysis translation at the first year of Modern Greek studies.

At the Department of Modern Greek studies at the Faculty of Philology of the University in Belgrade translation is taught from the first year of studies as a separate skill. It is primarily based on contrastive analysis of the target language and the mother tongue, which is in our case Serbian language. Our students of the first year of studies are provided with sufficient classes of Modern Greek language, where they develop the four basic skills for language acquisition: reading and writing comprehension and oral and written production.

Although grammar-translation method has been overcome and the new communicative approach has now the most important role in SLA, we still have the opinion that contrastive analysis can be very beneficial for the students.

By comparing and contrasting a target language to their mother tongue, students become more confident of the meaning of the words and notice the differences and similarities of different structures in both languages. They contrast not only the meanings, but also the morphological and syntactic patterns which can be used in both languages and it happens

sometimes that they understand better the structures in their own language through the target language.

It has been noticed that common mistakes in the target language are usually caused by language interference, and in that case the role of teacher is of crucial importance, because the unexperienced and dependent learner has to get the right and clear explanation of the language phenomenon. By negotiated interaction with or without production of pushed output learners learn more words than learners exposed to non-negotiated input.

Translation tasks embody the element of need since the words that have to be understood (when translating into L1), or produced (when translating into L2) are predetermined by the source text. The element of search is present as well. If an L2 word is unfamiliar, learners have to conduct a search for its meaning when translating into L1, or a search for its form when translating into L2. Most importantly, an element of evaluation is necessary to carry out a translation activity. There is usually more than one translation alternative for a given sentence. Therefore, when translating, learners have to make a decision as to how each alternative fits the text they create. When the translation is into L2, this decision will be based on the way other words in L2 combine with the new word. Hence, according to the model of involvement, the evaluation is strong. Since translation is a task with a high involvement load, it can be assumed that it will be effective in vocabulary learning (Laufer, Girsai 2008: 698-699).

Although our students are not highly proficient in Greek language, they can still learn from translation tasks. Translation in this case can be viewed not only as a corrective technique, but also as means for clarification of words and phrases, which facilitates the process of learning L2 and gives “security” to lower proficiency students. And despite the opinion that translation has been overcome and not beneficial for language learning, we are of different opinion. Namely, it has been of a great help to our students at all the language levels, but especially to low proficiency students who seek for the adequate equivalents in their mother tongue.

According to Panova, Lyster (2002: 589) the provision of target language exemplars via translation equivalents may have been necessitated by the low proficiency level of the students. The students may not have viewed translation as a corrective move in the same way they perceived other feedback types, as signaled by the higher rates of uptake and repair following these moves. The teacher's use of translation seems to have aimed not so much at provoking a response from the students but rather at providing additional language input to the students, given their low proficiency level.

In order to achieve good results in SLA, the role of the teacher is of great importance. The task of the translation teacher seems to be twofold:

1. The elicitation of 'correct' translations.
2. The prevention of 'incorrect' translations.

The first of these tasks deals with the systematic examination of the typical functional differences between the source and the target language so as to enable the student to grasp and master the equivalents of most of the common structural patterns. The second task is in some ways remedial, in that it deals with areas of usage where the advanced learner has already gone astray and aims to prevent the recurrence of these mistakes. Intra- and interlingual interference is more often than not the cause of such errors in this field (Perkins 1978: 236).

Perkins (1978: 237-238) thinks that it is the teacher's task to point out systematically where common patterns of equivalence differ, so that the student learns to be wary of mother tongue interference. It is not sufficient for the teacher to wait until such a typical pattern crops up within a 'standard' prose text: he should illustrate *a priori* these differing patterns of equivalence by means of clear examples. A general hypothesis in any kind of contrastive language analysis is that learning becomes easier whenever similarities occur, while learning is interfered with whenever contrasts occur.

Conclusion

It has been shown that both contrastive analysis and error analysis remained vital components of applied linguistics and language teaching. Neglecting the L1 would amount to 'burying your head in the sand and hoping that effortless acquisition will take place in time' (James 2005: 11). The evidence from the present research, together with evidence from grammar studies, suggests that there is indeed a place for contrastive analysis and translation activities in L2 teaching. This does not mean that we should abandon the communicative classroom and return to the 'grammar- translation' method, nor does it mean that we should teach the skill of translation at the expense of the ability to function in a foreign language.

Meaningful communication has been the goal of communicative language teaching, but the best method for achieving this goal may not be identical to the goal itself. Second language learners may benefit from contrastive form-focused instruction in selected L2 areas through raising their awareness of interlingual difficulties, stretching their linguistics resources, and engaging in involving tasks (Laufer, Girsai 2008:712).

Although contrastive analysis has a lot of benefits there is a “danger” of looking for the exact equivalent in L2. As Rokkan (1980: 224) points out, such equivalence is possible up to a point if confined to the kinds of linguistic structures that are often taught in grammar seminars, where more rigid systematization is integral to the method. The learner is understandably only too eager to grasp at rules, but we risk reinforcing 'foreign' usage if we fail to emphasize that our systematization may have only limited applicability when used in the wider context of the unedited text. The process of translating demands an attempt to draw on contextual knowledge from all relevant areas of language studies: literature and the study of society, for instance, together with the idiomatic use of appropriate language. The exercise will therefore aim at a synthesis of content and expression, and emphasize contemporary (or past) usage, in an attempt to parallel the mental processes of the native speaker. He claims that 'translation is not simply a matter of words and phrases but of the conventions, moods, and habits which affect the way in which given words and phrases work on those who share the same language and the same cultural heritage.' A translation has to be made to come across on the same cultural frequency on which it operated originally.

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