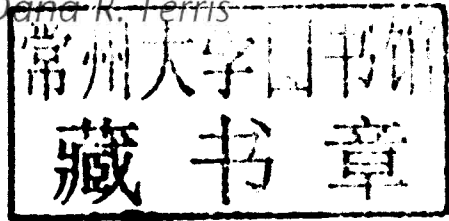# Written Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition and Writing

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Dana R. Ferris

WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND WRITING

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PREFACE

This book surveys theory, research, and practice on the important and sometimes controversial practice of *written corrective feedback* (written CF), also known as "error/ grammar correction," and its impact on second language acquisition (SLA) and second language (L2) writing development. Drawing from both second language acquisition (SLA) and writing/composition literature, it critically analyzes and synthesizes several parallel and complementary strands of research: work on error/feedback (both oral and written) in SLA and studies of the impact of error correction in writing/composition courses.

The volume begins with theory and history, surveying historical SLA views of "error" and what it means for short- and long-term acquisition as well as historical composition/writing views of the relative importance of error/language issues in overall writing development (Chapters 1–2). It then moves to a detailed analysis of the research that has been completed on oral corrective feedback, written corrective feedback following SLA research paradigms, and error correction work in L2 writing and composition studies (Chapters 3–4). This section concludes with discussion of a possible agenda for further research on this important topic (Chapter 5). The final section of the book focuses on pedagogical practice (Chapters 6–7). Based upon our understanding of the theory and current research findings, what should language and writing teachers do with regard to written CF? The book concludes with suggestions for teacher preparation for both language and writing instructors (Chapter 8). Each of the three major sections (theory, research, and practice) follows the same structure: a chapter looking at questions about written CF from the SLA perspective (Chapters 1, 3, 6) followed by one examining written CF through the lens of writing/composition concerns (Chapters 2, 4, 7). Chapters 5 and 8 are our synthesis chapters, where the two separate approaches to studies of written CF are brought together around the issues of a future research agenda and teacher preparation.

As Ferris (2010) wrote, "Although L2 writing and SLA researchers look at similar phenomena, often (but not always) in similar ways, it is important to understand that they do not necessarily ask the same questions" (p. 188). This is the first book to intentionally connect two separate but important lines of inquiry (SLA and L2 writing/composition studies) on the topic of corrective feedback. Though there have been volumes published on the topic in both arenas, no project to date has attempted to simultaneously analyze and synthesize both bodies of work. Ferris (2010) further noted:

> The two lines of research are not in competition; rather, they are complementary. There may be a methodological gap, but it is not a philosophical or theoretical chasm. L2 writing researchers and SLA researchers who investigate written CF—although they pose somewhat different questions—can and should learn from each other and build on one another's work.
>
> *(p. 192)*

The collaboration undertaken in this volume between an SLA researcher (Bitchener) and a writing researcher (Ferris) is thus our attempt to put the above philosophy into practice. Though we did author separate chapters (Bitchener wrote Chapters 1, 3, and 6; Ferris Chapters 2, 4, and 7), we read and commented extensively upon each other's work and co-authored Chapters 5 and 8.

In addition, this volume incorporates extensive recent research and reviews on written CF that have appeared in print since the publication of the abovementioned works, so it is an up-to-date and state-of-the-art treatment of a topic that is of importance and interest for both SLA researchers and writing researchers and practitioners. Finally, the sections on practice and future research should be of value to both instructors of L2 writers and to SLA/writing researchers. It should be a resource to researchers, to teacher educators, to classroom language and writing instructors, and to graduate students wanting to learn more about the topic of written CF and ways to study it. It could also be a useful addition to a reading list in courses on teaching composition, on second language teaching methods, on second language acquisition, on pedagogical grammar, or on the more specialized topic of response to student writing.

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CONTENTS

Theory and History of Error Treatment in SLA and Composition Studies

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PERSPECTIVES ON ERROR AND WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SLA

In this chapter, we survey a range of theoretical perspectives on the role and treatment of error in second language acquisition (SLA). In our preface, we explained that the focus of attention given to the role and treatment of error by theorists and educators in L2 composition studies and L2 language studies sometimes has differed and that the way in which this book is organized reflects these differences. Thus, in this opening chapter, we consider the role of error and written corrective feedback (CF) from an SLA language learning perspective. Chapter 2 then looks at the compositionist perspective on error and its treatment.

SLA theorists and researchers are interested in how individuals learn or acquire a second language. Consequently, they are interested in what can be done to help learners overcome the errors they make in the process of acquiring the target language. This raises the question about the extent to which errors should be seen in a negative or positive light. In other words, should errors be seen as linguistic acts that need to be prevented from occurring or as acts that should be viewed positively because of (1) the light they shed on a learner's current level of acquisition and (2) the role they can play in the development of the target language? In order to have an informed view on this issue, one needs to take into account the various theoretical positions that have been advocated in the literature. However, theoretical positions can only have validity if they are supported by research evidence. Therefore, this chapter will introduce the theoretical perspectives we consider to be most relevant to the role of error and written corrective feedback in the SLA process and conclude with an overview of some of the key research that has empirically investigated these perspectives and their associated pedagogical applications, leaving a more extensive and in-depth discussion of the individual studies to Chapter 3.

Early Perspectives on Error and Written CF in SLA

Behaviorist Perspectives

During the 1950s and 1960s, errors were considered more negatively than they are today because they were seen to interfere with the learning process and so should be prevented from occurring. As Brooks (1960) put it, "error, like sin, is to be avoided and its influence overcome" (p. 58). Behaviorist accounts of language learning, prominent in these years, claimed that errors should not be tolerated because they can be habit-forming and that, if they are allowed to exist, will inevitably interfere with the learning of new target-like habits. It was believed that learning occurred when learners had the opportunity to practice making the correct response to the stimuli they received. If incorrect responses were made, corrective feedback was given. However, the focus of the behaviorist approach was more on error prevention than error treatment.

Not surprisingly, these beliefs led to a number of pedagogical initiatives. In order to help learners produce error-free statements, Brooks (1960) recommended that learners be given opportunities "to observe and practice the right model a sufficient number of times" and "to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model" (p. 58). As teachers adopted the audiolingual approach to achieve these goals, they required their students to spend hours and hours memorizing dialogues, manipulating pattern drills, and studying a large number of grammatical generalizations. "Predictably," as Hendrickson (1978) explained, "most students who could not or did not make the effort to transfer audiolingual training to communicative use soon forgot the dialogue lines, the pattern drills, and the grammatical generalizations that they had studied or practiced in school" (p. 387). Somewhat surprisingly, though, many teachers never questioned the validity and feasibility of this mechanistic approach to error prevention.

Another approach that was recommended to help teachers treat learner errors was one involving Contrastive Analysis (CA). Believing it was interference from the learner's first language (L1) that was the primary source of errors, structural linguists spoke of the need to identify features of the L2 that differed from the L1 so that the negative transfer of the L1 could be prevented. CA involved describing comparable elements of both languages, identifying differences between the two, and predicting which errors learners would be likely to make. In doing this, it was believed that explanations would then be provided about why learners make errors and, therefore, about the role that teachers could play in their treatment. Although CA appeared to offer a positive way forward, it soon came under attack in the late 1960s and early 1970s as empirical evidence began to reveal its inability to predict the types of errors that were in fact being made by learners. A range of studies (Burt, 1975; Ervin-Tripp, 1970; Falk, 1968; George, 1972; Hendrickson, 1977; Hussein, 1971; Politzer & Ramirez, 1973; Richards,

1973a, 1973b; Selinker, 1969; Wilkins, 1968; Wolfe, 1967) revealed that, although interference from the learner's L1 is a major source of phonological errors, interference errors are only one of the many types of errors found in other areas of the learner's linguistic knowledge. Thus, the value of CA as the diagnostician and panacea of all ills was soon questioned.

At the same time, developments in the fields of linguistics (including L1 acquisition) and psychology began to attract the attention of theorists seeking alternative explanations about the source(s) of L2 learner error and how it should be treated. In the field of linguistics, structuralist accounts, describing the surface structure of a large corpus of language, were being replaced with a generative account, focusing on the rule-governed and creative nature of language. In the field of psychology, the prominent role of the environment in shaping children's language and behavior, advocated by Skinner (1957), was giving way to a more developmentalist view of learning, promoted by Piaget and colleagues (Piaget, 1970; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966). Each of these developments was reflected in Chomsky's (1959) beliefs about how children acquire their L1. He explained that children do not learn and produce a large set of sentences but create new sentences that have never been heard before, and that they do this because they internalize rules rather than strings of words. With regard to the complexity and abstractness of such rules, he explained that (1) children have an innate faculty that guides them in their learning of language; (2) they are programmed to discover the rules; and (3) they are guided in doing this by an innate knowledge of what the rules should look like. Underpinned by Chomsky's views, the L1 acquisition studies of the 1970s (e.g., Brown, 1973; Klima & Bellugi, 1966; Slobin, 1970) further revealed (1) that children go through stages; (2) that these stages are similar across children for a given language and across languages; (3) that child language is rule-governed and systematic; (4) that children are resistant to error correction; (5) that their processing capacity limits the number of rules they can apply at any one time; and (6) that they will revert to earlier hypotheses when two or more rules compete. These discoveries, together with the growing disillusionment with CA's ability to predict areas of difficulty, led to an interest in the language that is produced by L2 learners and, in particular, to an interest in the systematic investigation of second language learner errors, known as Error Analysis (EA).

The particular contribution of EA was its convincing discovery that the majority of L2 errors do not come from the learner's L1 or the L2 and that they must, therefore, be learner-internal. So, in order to understand them, error classifications were attempted by researchers and comparisons were made with errors that children were also making as they learned their L1. But, despite its practical focus, EA soon came under attack on theoretical grounds. On the one hand, it was being realized that the behaviorist belief of learning, as a response to external stimuli, was too limited in its focus and that it failed to account for what occurs in the learner's mind. On the other hand, it was argued that the dynamic and systematic nature of learner errors, revealed also in L1 acquisition

studies, showed that learners actively construct their own rules about what is acceptable in the target language and that the language they produce develops over time. In 1972, Selinker coined the term "interlanguage" to describe this focus on the language produced by learners. It was characterized as a "system" in its own right, obeying its own rules, and as a "dynamic" system, evolving over time.

Early investigations into the nature of the learner's interlanguage were inspired by the L1 acquisition morpheme studies of Brown (1973) and de Villiers and de Villiers (1973). Examining the acquisition of fourteen grammatical morphemes in English, they found a consistent pattern in the order of emergence. This development then inspired SLA researchers to investigate the acquisition of the same morphemes by L2 learners. Dulay and Burt (1973) investigated the acquisition of eight of Brown's morphemes in Spanish-speaking children and Chinese-speaking children acquiring English as an L2 and found that children of different language backgrounds learning English in a variety of host country environments acquire grammatical morphemes in a similar order. Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974) also found that adult as well as child learners of English as an L2 develop accuracy in a number of grammatical morphemes in a set order, irrespective of the learning context. From this, they concluded that the existence of such an order indicated the operation of internal principles. Additional support for this observation came from studies reporting the systematic development of syntactic domains, including negative structures, interrogatives, and relative clauses.

In light of these findings, earlier theoretical perspectives about how an L2 is acquired and about the role of error in that process were rapidly being undermined. The role of error in the L2 learning process was, therefore, seen less in terms of a sinful act that must be prevented from occurring and more positively as an indicator of the mental processes that take place during the learning and acquisition of the target language. Before we discuss the role of error in second language development, it is important that we review the kind of research that was being undertaken in these early years on the role of written CF and the pedagogical advice that was being offered.

Early Written CF Research and Pedagogical Advice

Even from the early years of SLA research, studies of written CF had investigated pedagogically driven questions such as the reasons for correcting errors, which errors should be corrected and when, how they should be corrected, and who should do the correcting. Compared with the foci of more recent years, the early studies did not look at the more crucial underlying questions about whether or not, and the extent to which, written CF has the potential to help learners acquire the target language. Nevertheless, empirical questions were being asked about the treatment of written error even though, as Hendrickson (1978) wrote in his

review essay, they were really "quite speculative and relatively scant" (p. 396). On the questions that this research did investigate, Burt (1975) reported that no current standards existed on whether, when, which, or how student errors should be corrected or who should correct them, and Robinson (1971) noted that there were few widely accepted linguistic criteria for grammatical and lexical correction in foreign language (FL) teaching. Although Hendrickson (1977) wrote of the immediate need for more research into these issues, he acknowledged that there was a body of literature that was beginning to think about the role of written CF in L2 learning and how it might be most effectively provided.

Should learner errors be corrected? The first question—should learner errors be corrected—was considered in a more limited way during these years than it has been more recently. In these early years, the focus was on reasons for correcting errors rather than on the more important question about whether it can be expected to "work" or play a role in the SLA process. According to Corder (1973), George (1972), and Kennedy (1973), correction was important because it was expected to help learners identify their own errors and discover the functions and limitations of the syntactical and lexical forms of the target language. In addition to these reasons, Cathcart and Olsen (1976) wrote of the importance of meeting learner expectations. They found, in their survey of college students' attitudes toward error correction, that they not only wanted to be corrected but that they wanted to be corrected more than teachers believed was necessary.

When should learner errors be corrected? Although the second question—when should learner errors be corrected—was largely under-researched, there was no shortage of opinion on the matter. As Hendrickson (1978) noted, there were at least 15 pieces of literature claiming that teachers had largely rejected the obsessive concern with error avoidance that characterized audiolingually orientated practice, and that there was a willingness to accept a wide range of errors and only correct those that they considered most problematic. But, because there was little empirical evidence on this issue during these years, Hendrickson (1978) called for more experimental research and suggested that, "it should focus on the cognitive effects of error correction based on different levels of language proficiency and relevant personality factors such as willingness to take risks" (p. 390).

Which learner errors should be corrected? The third question—which learner errors should be corrected—was considered more from a theoretical perspective than from an empirical perspective. Three broad categories of error were considered by teachers to be the most worthy of being corrected: those that impair communication significantly, those that have highly stigmatizing effects on the listener or reader, and those that occur frequently in learners' speech and writing. The few studies that investigated the question (Hendrickson, 1977; Olsson, 1972; Powell, 1973) found respectively that errors in French often resulted from reduction (especially in tense markers); that semantic errors in Swedish hindered communication more than syntactic ones; that global errors in intermediate