Investigating the Efficacy of Focused and Unfocused Corrective Feedback on the Accurate Use of Prepositions in Written Work

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Abstract

This paper discusses findings from a study investigating feedback efficacy on the accurate use of prepositions by ESL learners in written work over a period of 12 weeks. The study involved two treatment groups and a control group comparing the differential effects of the focused indirect with the unfocused indirect corrective feedback on the uptake and retention measured from the pretest, immediate and delayed posttests. The study also analysed the language-related episodes (LREs) occurring in the collaborative dialogue during the treatment sessions to identify the factors affecting uptake and retention of the corrective feedback in subsequent writing tasks. Findings revealed that both treatment groups outperformed the control group in the posttests, but, there was no significant difference between the unfocused and focused corrective feedback groups. Evidence from the LREs analysis suggests that extensive engagement in all the three functions of the Swain (2005) output hypothesis: noticing, hypothesis testing and metalinguistic, during the collaborative dialogue contribute toward the enhancement of uptake and retention. Since both correction types were equally facilitative in increasing accuracy of preposition usage, teachers may consider using them accordingly in writing tasks.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, focused corrective feedback, unfocused corrective feedback, language-related episodes, preposition use

1. Introduction

1.1 Roles of Corrective Feedback in Language Learning

Corrective feedback (henceforth CF) is presumed to be an essential element in language learning and for decades, second language (L2) writing teachers and researchers have been investigating its role and efficacy in second language acquisition. Providing feedback to learners’ written work has always been a challenging task as one may not be certain that the feedback given does have effect on the learners’ language development. On the teachers’ part, it can be discouraging when the energy and time spent on trying to provide feedback to the students, particularly on grammatical errors, do not seem to benefit the learners. This predicament is shared by some of the educators and researchers (e.g., Ferris, 1999; Lee, 2009; Truscott, 1996). Researchers like Truscott (1996) has even put forward the notion that not only corrective feedback is ineffective in helping learners improve their language accuracy, but it can also pose harmful effects on the learning process.

To date, many researchers have tried to negate Truscott’s claim by providing empirical evidence on the benefits of corrective feedback on the learners’ language development. Nevertheless, studies carried out vary in results as to whether the claims can be contrary to or in agreement with that of Truscott’s stance (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Ferris, 2006; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009). Ferris (2006) believes that in order for the feedback to be effective, the types of feedback provided should be given emphasis. F. Hyland and K. Hyland (2006) state that delivering feedback in a variety of “mode” will ensure effectiveness and that these approaches should provide opportunities for learners to interact and revise their work more clearly based on the written corrections given to them. It seems that teachers should be more resourceful in dealing with these feedback issues.

Peterson and McClay (2010) state that most teachers believe corrective feedback is imperative to help students