In the Name of God

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The Role of Written Languaging in Development of the Grammatical Accuracy of Iranian EFL Compositions

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To

My mom and dad

ABSTRACT

Rested on sociocultural theory (SCT), this study attempted to examine the effect of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) followed by producing written languaging on developing writing accuracy over new tasks. To this aim, two intact Iranian EFL classes at the low-intermediate level were randomly assigned to two experimental groups: direct (n = 25) and indirect (n = 25). Both groups wrote on a number of the same topics for 15 sessions; the first writing was taken as the pre-test and the last one was conceived of as the post-test. During treatment sessions, the direct group was provided with direct WCF on the erroneous parts of their compositions whereas the indirect group's mistakes were only underlined. Then, both groups, in each session, were required to language (write) about the reasons behind the parts targeted by WCF; the written explanations produced by the learners were recognized as written languaging episodes (WLEs). Results of the study revealed that the direct group managed to generate a higher number of correctly explained WLEs than the indirect group. But respecting gains in accuracy, it came to light that both groups made significant gains in accuracy from the pre- to the post-test; nonetheless, no significant difference was unfolded between two groups. The findings are discussed in the light of SCT in general and languaging in particular. Finally, some theoretical and pedagogical implications are put forward.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that English language learners from varied backgrounds bring markedly different approaches to learning second language writing and this point adds to the complexity of the large wealth of factors contributing to developing writing proficiency. One of the hotly debated issues in developing second language writing is giving corrective feedback (CF) on learners' linguistic errors. In fact, a large share of research on EFL/ESL writing has been mostly concerned with why and how to respond to students' writings. Responding to students' writing is one of the most crucial tasks of teachers in order to motivate students and assist them to go beyond their current levels of writing proficiency. While a large number of EFL/ESL writing teachers are in favor of responding to students' writings through teacher corrective feedback (Ferris, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), there are some opposing voices to the provision of corrective feedback on the grounds that it is unable to make real changes to grammatical accuracy in writing (e.g.,Truscott, 1996). Despite such strong criticism from the camp led by Truscott, offering CF has been justified on some theoretical grounds. For instance, Ellis (2005) has put that error correction, as a form-focused activity, can play a positive role in second language acquisition. Ellis posited that since CF can direct learners' attention to linguistic forms, they obtain the opportunity to possibly detect the target items in their focal attention (i.e., awareness at the level of noticing) and process them at a deeper level (i.e., awareness at the level of understanding); thus, it is argued that CF, as an incidental kind of focus on form, can enhance learners' accuracy in writing.

Another theoretical pillar underlying error correction rests on Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990, 2001). Schmidt postulated that attention and awareness are two indispensable cornerstones of learning and only through noticing or conscious attention is the ground for converting input into intake laid. Additionally, CF provides learners with opportunities to notice "a mismatch between what they can produce and what they need to produce as well as between what they produce and what target language speakers produce"

(Schmidt, 2001, p. 6); in fact, the learners are prompted and helped to better detect the gaps in their developing interlanguage systems by receiving CF. In a likewise manner, Ellis (1995) speculated that CF sets the scene for 'cognitive comparison' or what was previously referred to as noticing the gap. That is to say, the learners can make a comparison between their erroneous parts of their developing interlanguage and the correct forms in order to redress or restructure the inconsistencies in their current linguistic abilities. Especially, written corrective feedback (WCF), due to its offline processing nature, purveys EFL learners with more opportunities to compare their output with the received CF so as to pinpoint and consequently weed out the mismatches and loopholes in their interlanguage (Van Beuningen, de Jong, & Kuiken, 2008). Similarly, Swain (1995) underscored that producing output combined with feedback not only can push learners to notice the linguistic features but also they are prompted to identify the gaps in their dynamic interlanguage system; as a result, their existing interlanguage is pushed towards restructuring and betterment.

As noted earlier, the efficiency of CF has been challenged majorly by Truscott (1996). Truscott remarked that CF fails to improve accuracy or the use of complex structures in writing. To him, providing feedback presents a "simplistic view of language learning as essentially the transfer of information from teacher to student" (p. 342) and it has even some deleterious effects on writing instruction since the time and energy consumed by CF can be devoted to practicing productive aspects of writing. However, as Ashwell (2000) ascertained, now there is compelling evidence supporting the efficacy of CF in developing written grammatical accuracy in general. Additionally, more recently, an array of studies has provided cogent evidence for the effectiveness of CF in enhancing a limited range of grammatical structures, what is mainly referred to as focused CF (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Sheen, 2007). Moreover, some supporting evidence for the utility of in-depth CF in all errors, that is, unfocused CF, has been offered (e.g., Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2008, 2012). As a result of such persuasive findings, the focus of research has recently shifted to determining the optimal type of feedback and the variables affecting its usefulness rather than whether CF is efficient or not.

Direct and indirect WCF are two prevalent types of responding to students' written errors which have grabbed the attention of many studies (e.g., Ellis, 2009). The former refers to explicit correction provided by teachers and the latter involves indicating that an error exists without really correcting it (Ferris, 2002, 2006). Studies on written CF have indicated that direct CF seems to be superior to other types of feedback (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Konch, 2008, 2010; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2007). In contrast, indirect CF as a technique to engage students in a type of problem-solving and guided-learning has accrued some noticeable theoretical support from the second language acquisition (SLA) research; it is argued that indirect CF can encourage learners to burden the responsibility for their own progress (Ferris, 2002, 2006; Lalande, 1982). It is worth mentioning that empirical evidence on comparing these two types of WCF has been mixed and consequently inconclusive (e.g., Van Beuningen et al., 2008).

Drawing on the concept of output hypothesis, Swain (1985, 1995) posited that significance of the output lies in the fact that output augments learners' current knowledge of language further than semantic processing of language. In essence, it initiates the process of awareness of discrepancies between the learners' interlanguage system and the target language, what Ellis (1995) called ' cognitive comparison'. That is to say, it involves learners in syntactic processing of language (Swain, 1995). Consequently, CF should be offered in such an efficient way that learners can optimize their performances by extending the condition to process the given feedback not only at the level of noticing or ' perfunctory noticing' but also at the level of understanding, that is, ' substantive noticing' (Qi & Lapkin, 2001, p. 291). Qi and Lapkin (2001) postulated that feedback needs to promote engaging learners actively in language to process the feedback unless it fails to lead to development. Likewise, the level of involvement and contribution wield potentially influence language development. In this regard, the role of conscious attention in L2 acquisition has been specifically highlighted in an effort to lead learners to achieving self-regulatory potentials (control or management of one's task independently) of the learning process.

Grounded in a Vygotskian sociocultural theory of mind, the mediatory role of language in shaping and reshaping our capabilities was captured and underscored by Vygotsky (1978, 1987). Vygotsky highlighted that our relationship with both internal and

external worlds is indirect or mediated. He was of the opinion that language as a powerful mediatory tool can help us communicate with others in our social milieu in order to enhance our lower-order biologically endowed cognitive abilities which are similar to other animals' cognitive capabilities. Language realized in the two forms of private speech and collaborative dialogue can mediate language learning. The former is taken as an audible speech addressed to the self rather than addressing to others (Ohta, 2001), while the latter refers to "dialogue in which L2 learners are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building" (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 102). Vygotsky went on to posit that speaking and writing are two representations of language which can refine and enrich our understanding and cognition. By drawing upon Vygotsky's mindset, Swain (2006) coined the term 'languaging' in order to account for "a dynamic, never-ending process of using language to make meaning" (p. 96) and to capture language as a 'process' and 'product' at the same time. More precisely, Swain referred to languaging as "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language (2006, p. 98). She remarked that languaging or verbalizing our thoughts about language itself is a powerful means for language learning as well.

As hinted at the previous section, exploring the utility of languaging in SLA has taken up two strands: collaborative dialogue and private speech. SLA research has provided convincing evidence for the contribution of both collaborative dialogue (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1998) and private speech (e.g., Ohta, 2001) to developing various aspects of second language learning processes. Additionally, it has been postulated that WCF can mediate the development of writing proficiency; however, determining the optimal type of WCF has been the subject of continuous debate.

In the same line with the theme of this argument, written languaging (learners' reflections and deliberations for given feedback) is perceived one of the ways to extend learners' contribution to perceiving WCF in order to assist them to be aware of reasons behind the targeted errors (Suzuki, 2009, 2012). Therefore, written languaging can bring greater readiness for L2 learners to identify the gaps in their linguistic knowledge and to attend to some linguistic problems so that it provides L2 learners with opportunities to learn through the language they are using and possibly helps them to put errors right by

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hypothesizing about language and carry out this understanding to the subsequent learning context. In other words, written languaging aids to gain the self-regulatory potential. Further, Suzuki (2012) argued that direct WCF can guide learners to draw more accurate conclusions during languaging since it narrows down the range of their initial hypotheses. However, no study to date has compared the efficiency of direct and indirect WCF in accuracy of the languaging process. Elucidating the role of the feedback type in languaging preciseness is of paramount importance because it can unravel some of the mysteries behind the efficiency of WCF in increasing writing accuracy. The review of the literature indicated that most studies on WCF have examined their efficacy from a quantitative perspective within the cognitive accounts of language learning; as a result, the processes underlying their effectiveness have remained underexplored. Therefore, this study employs the concept of written languaging as a lens to delve into some processes undertaken as a result of direct and indirect WCF; furthermore, to capture a better picture of the processes, both groups under investigation in this study were interviewed on how they have reacted to WCF and languaged about it.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

There has been a hot and prolonged debate over the efficiency of direct and indirect WCF on fostering second language writing accuracy (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Farrokhi & Sattarpoor, 2012). The supporting camp for direct WCF has argued that direct WCF is more conducive to enhancing accuracy on the grounds that it

(1) reduces the type of confusion that they may experience when they fail to understand or remember, for example, the meaning of error codes used by teachers,

(2) provides them with sufficient information to resolve more complex errors in, for example, syntactic structure and idiomatic usage, and

(3) offers more immediate feedback on hypotheses that may have been made. (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, p. 415)

On the other hand, the camp in favor of indirect WCF has argued for the superior efficiency of indirect WCF with regard to improving writing accuracy; they propose that indirect WCF can involve learners in "guided writing and problem solving" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, pp. 414-15). The review of the related literature revealed that all studies ventured to compare and contrast the efficacy of direct and indirect WCF in increasing writing accuracy investigated this issue from cognitive and interactionist perspectives; that is, they failed to delve into the underlying processes which result in the superiority or inferiority of one over the other. Thus, this study sets out to shed some light on this issue by employing the tenets of sociocultural theory in general and languaging in particular. Additionally, some studies (e.g. Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Van Beuningen et al., 2008) have proposed that providing learners with feedback is not sufficient for efficiency of CF; they are all in harmony voice that involving learners in CF can increase its potential effectiveness. Drawing on the aforementioned vital points, Suzuki (2012) investigated the role of written languaging produced as a result of direct WCF in text revision; Suzuki indicated that the generated written languaging could increase writing accuracy of immediate text revision. Though, it was a pioneering study in the landscape of written languaging, some criticism can be leveled against it. First, it lacked a control group; thus, it could only provide suggestive evidence for the efficiency of written languaging in fostering writing accuracy. Further, it is open to criticism on the grounds that it only explored the effect of languaging on immediate revision of the same text; therefore, as pointed out by Truscott (1996), immediate revision might not be a robust indicative of language acquisition.

To Summarize, this study firstly attempts to compensate for the aforementioned loopholes in Suzuki's study in order to more rigorously examine the role of written languaging on cultivating accuracy. Secondly, by drawing upon sociocultural theory, this study tries to cast some light on the processes undertaken as a result of the two prevalent types of direct and indirect WCF to narrow down the divided views on their efficiency in fostering accuracy. Thirdly, the role of written languaging in response to these two types of feedback in enhancing writing accuracy in a new piece of writing and its long term effect are examined; last but not least, an attempt is made to compare and contrast the efficacy of

languaging generated in reply to direct and indirect WCF in terms of gains in writing accuracy in a new writing task.

1.2 Significance of the Study

As L2 learners try to promote writing development, CF supposedly plays a premier role in fostering this process. First, the debate over the efficiency of the two common types of WCF, indirect and direct, has been the matter of controversy for at least the past two decades. Ellis (2009) asserts that direct feedback can shed more light on the problematic parts and explicitly guide learners to rectify their committed errors. In the same line, Ferris and Roberts (2001) point out that direct feedback is superior to indirect WCF for learners with a low level of language proficiency. On the other hand, some researchers like Sheen (2007) argue that indirect WCF is much better for fostering acquisition of some grammatical parts of the language due to the fact that it can involve learners in higher cognitive processing. However, all these attempts have drawn upon the tenets of cognitive accounts of language learning and made some speculations. Thus, drawing on the principles of sociocultural theory can cast some light on the reasons behind the efficiency of direct and indirect WCF to narrow down the gap in the literature to some extent. Further, this study can encourage second language researchers to employ theoretical triangulation rather than restricting themselves to investigating issues from one theoretical framework. That is, by looking at issues from various theoretical perspectives, they can capture a better picture of the underlying processes of second language acquisition.

Additionally, the results of this study can be of significant importance to language teachers. If the results of the study reveal that generating written languaging can foster gains in grammatical accuracy, the teachers can draw upon such results and require their learners to give the account of their committed errors and the reasons behind such errors in the written form. Further, the results can, to some extent, guide the teachers to provide learners with more effective types of WCF.

Another group that can take advantage out of the results of the current study is teacher trainers/educators. They can resort to the findings to introduce written languaging into in-service and pre-service programs. Further, they can argue for the efficiency of direct or

indirect feedback with higher assurance from the viewpoint of sociocultural theory. Last but not least, language learners can be the beneficiary of the results of this study. If the teachers inform the learners about the usefulness of the written languaging in developing grammatical accuracy, they may be convinced to write down the reasons behind their errors whenever they receive feedback from their teachers or peers.

1.3 Research questions and hypotheses

In order to meet the objectives of the current study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Do direct and indirect written corrective feedbacks bring about different resolutions to Written Languaging Episodes (WLEs)? (i.e., correctly explained, incorrectly explained, and unexplained)
2. Does written languaging, prompted as a result of direct WCF, lead to any significant gains in accuracy of writing new tasks?
3. Does written languaging, generated in response to indirect WCF, result in enhancing accuracy of writing new tasks?
4. Do direct and indirect written corrective feedback followed by producing written languaging differ in improving writing accuracy over writing new tasks?

Based on the aforementioned questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H_0 1. Direct and indirect written corrective feedback do not bring about different resolutions to Written Languaging Episodes (WLEs) (i.e., correctly explained, incorrectly explained, and unexplained).

H_0 2. Written languaging, prompted as a result of direct WCF, does not lead to any significant gains in accuracy of writing new tasks.

H_0 3. Written languaging, generated in response to indirect WCF, does not result in enhancing accuracy of writing new tasks?

H_0 4. Direct and indirect written corrective feedback followed by producing written languaging do not differ in improving writing accuracy over writing new tasks.

1.4 Theoretical and operational definition of the key terms

This study is founded on some key terms defined as follows:

Direct written corrective feedback: This is a feedback strategy in which the instructor indicates the location of errors and provides correct linguistic forms above or near the linguistic errors, "crossed unnecessary linguistic forms out, or inserted a missing word" (Ellis, 2009, p. 99).

Indirect written corrective feedback: This feedback involves indicating the location of the erroneous forms without correcting them by underlining the errors or coding (Ellis, 2009).

Languaging: Swain (2006) defines languaging as "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. Languaging about language is one of the ways we learn language" (p, 98).

Written languaging: written languaging is defined as learners' explanations and rationales about a task which is being performed to comprehend and encode the instructional material via their own words. In this process, the learners "make inferences about the materials and repair previous understanding about them, resulting in deeper processing of these materials" (Suzuki, 2012. p, 3).

Language related episodes (LREs): Swain and Lapkin (1998) define a language related episode as "any part of dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others"(p. 326). LREs are signs of the learners' attention to form. LREs also provide a profound insight into the