Using Corrective Feedback to Promote L2 Writing from a Sociocultural Theory Perspective

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Abstract. Language research has concerned about the way teachers correct second language learners’ writing. Corrective feedback (CF) focusing on the language deviancy arouses heated discussions since there are disagreements about the effects of corrective feedback on L2 learning. Arguments claim that CF is the inefficient and has demotivating factor on learners. However many empirical research verify the benefits of corrective feedback. The purpose of the study is adopting a sociocultural perspective to understand CF. By making an overview of sociocultural theory in L2 learning to address the questions and doubts listed by CF research, the study finds that the effects of CF can be maximized.

Introduction

Feedback as an indispensible part in learning plays a curtail role in both informing both learners’ current learning performance and instructing with guidance for further improvements. Corrective feedback focuses on the linguistic deficiencies made by learners [1]. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), with rising attention, relevant research has discussed diversified aspects: (1) whether corrective feedback mediates acquisition;(2) typology of corrective feedback and its effectiveness;(3)when to provide corrective feedback. The emphasis of above research is the value of corrective feedback. There are controversies on the above issues. Researchers have proposed adopting a sociocultural theory perspective to understand CF as an interactive technique. This paper will first introduce the definition of CF and the arguments on CF. Then a sociocultural theory perspective will be adapted to analyze CF from an interactive and negotiated perspective.

Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback (CF) is also known as negative feedback, which points out the learners’ inaccurate utterance of L2 language [1]. Compared to positive feedback signaling the correct using of L2 language, corrective feedback has aroused more research interests in SLA [2, 3, 4, 5]. Research on corrective feedback investigates its influence on L2 acquisition, the protagonist of providing CF, the timing of CF, characteristic of effective CF. However, since CF is a complicated process containing multiple use of corrective strategies and further triggering moves, there are controversies in regard to the above issues.

Arguments about CF

The value of corrective feedback is severely doubted by some researchers. Truscott [6] precisely opposed to the grammar correction in L2 writing, in that he claimed that grammatical correction is ineffective and demotivated to learners. Truscott draws the inefficacy of grammar correction from theoretical and practical aspects. The order acquisition theory indicates that learning occurs in sequence. However if the teacher corrects the error that the learner is not within the current intellectual development, the correction will fail. On the other side, even if learners possibly correct errors made in the writing task, it is not guaranteed that similar errors will not appear in the subsequent draft. In other words, Truscott stated the grammar correction can not result in
acquisition. In terms of practices, correction occurs as teachers recognize problems, but Truscott argues that recognition of error does not mean teachers understand why students make such errors. As students receive the corrective feedback, students may fail to understand the correction as well. Another negative effect of CF pointed out by Truscott is that it demotivated leaners who are stressed and unpleasant under negative feedback informing they are wrong all the time.

In light of the statements, Ferris [7] refuted the arguments, asserting the contributive effects of CF and its value derived from prioritized, clear, and consistent correction. Although recent studies reveal the CF promotes acquisition, Ferris notes that Truscott’s arguments concerning the gap between teachers and students, and learners’ motivation toward CF are worth of noticing. Some researchers [1,5, 8] have proposed a sociocultural perspective to understand CF address the challenges of CF and maximize the positive effects of CF.

A sociocultural Perspective of CF

The essence of sociocultural theory (SCT)on L2 learning is that acquisition occurs in interactive social contexts where novices can participate and are assisted by experts. Language learning is not regarded as a linear way but rather social process involving interaction and negotiation [9]. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) further explains learning interaction should be within ZPD. ZPD is a “distance between the actual development level that has already formed and a potential development level determined by problem solving under the adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” [10, p. 86] Another essential notion in SCT is scaffolding. Scaffolding emphasizes the guided support should consider learners’ needs and be conducted in interactive ways in which learners (novices) can participate. When applying SCT into corrective feedback, CF should be regarded as social interactions in which learners can participate and negotiate with teachers, and CF should be within learners ZPD.

Joint- participation of CF. From practical experience, teachers may find that students tend to neglect the feedback of writing, which minimizes the effects of feedback. One of the underlying reasons is that students perceive feedback as a teacher-conducted behavior [11]. An interaction should be established by inviting students to participate in CF. One strategy to encourage students is that dividing assignment into stages [11]. At the first stage, teachers provide CF and score a temporary grade, and after students revise their writing by referring to the CF, a final grade will be provided on the basis of their second draft and utilizing the CF. By experiencing the direct benefits of using CF to get a higher score, this method stimulates students to engage in the CF process.

Accessible and comprehensible CF. Another possible reason leaners pay less attention to CF is that the feedback may be incomprehensible for them. On the one side, the CF is not within learners’ ZPD, in that they are able to use their current knowledge to comprehend. In regard to this, assisted help from the teachers are supposed to provide through discussing the errors with learners. The research result has revealed that CF provided within learners’ ZDP is more effective [5]. On the other side, the language used in CF should be considered as well, because comments that are comprehensible to teachers are not necessarily understandable by leaners. As leaners receive their feedback, it is useful to offer chances for them to read the comments and raise questions if they do not understand.

Understanding criteria and goals. The demotivating effects of CF may derive from the failure of establishing a consensus between teachers and students. Teachers are quite familiar with the writing criteria and goals, while learners have no clue of marking criteria and purpose of CF. This calls for explicitly explaining of writing criteria. It is also helpful for learners to discuss and mark a piece of writing together with the teachers by using the criteria [12]. The interaction of co-marking opens a dialogue in which learners present their interpretations of writing standards. Therefore, the gap between what teachers believe and students’ understanding can be diminished. Besides jointly marking writing, Nicol [12] also proposed to assign time for decoding CF and divide students into groups so that they can discuss and share their understanding of the comments. Meanwhile, after comprehending the goals of CF emphasizing on instructional purpose for better writing rather than merely corrective, a more positive attitude can be cultivated towards CF by learners.
Conclusion

CF is a common strategy adopted by most instructors in writing class, and thus CF arouses research attention to discuss and examine its effectiveness. Researchers who are against CF have questioned the efficacy of CF in terms of its role for promoting acquisition and the demotivating factor imposed to L2 Learners. There are no simple answers to the issues and the controversies require further investigation. However, as applying a sociocultural theory perspective of L2 learning to CF, some new and important insights emerge to enlarge its positive effects. CF should be regarded as an interactive process where both teachers and students can participate and negotiate. Considering that, joint-participation is the core value. This requires teachers to invite and motivate learners to approach the feedback and also the criteria and goals of writing should be understood by learners, through explaining criteria and co-marking writing. The shared understanding is conductive for learners to accept CF in a positive way and hold clear goals for better writing. Meanwhile, CF should be within learners ZDP, which means the CF is accessible for learners. Assisted help from teachers should also be provided, as learners are needed.

References

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