

## **Interlanguage Development: The Effect of Unfocused Feedback on L2 Writing**

Rachael Ruegg, Kanda University of International Studies

Studies on unfocused feedback in writing tend to measure change in the number of errors over time. If unfocused feedback does reduce the number of errors significantly over time, it is arguable that along with this increased accuracy goes equal or decreased complexity. This paper will discuss an approach to measuring the effect of unfocused feedback which takes into account repetition of errors over instances of writing, indicating that a learner is developing his or her interlanguage, rather than simply considering the number of errors. The results of a pilot study using this approach will be explained.

In the pilot study, one group of English language learners was given feedback on content while another was given both feedback on content and indirect feedback on errors. Repetitions of the same errors on subsequent instances of writing were counted. The treatment group was found to have significantly less repetition of the same errors in subsequent journal entries when compared with the control group. This indicates that, while unfocused feedback may not lead to increased accuracy, it may result in interlanguage development.

Various recent studies have been conducted in which the effect of focused feedback on writing was investigated and improvement on the use of a particular language structure was measured (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takahashi, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009). On the other hand, a large majority of studies on feedback in writing have examined the effect of unfocused feedback (feedback given on all language forms). The studies examining unfocused feedback tend to have measured a change in the total number of errors over time. This doesn't seem to be an appropriate way to measure the effect of unfocused feedback as it is natural that language learners will continue to develop their language skills over a long period of time rather than being able to write perfectly error-free compositions.

As is clear from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature, language development is not a simple process. If unfocused feedback does reduce the number of errors significantly over time it is reasonable to believe that along with this increased accuracy goes equal or even decreased complexity. Rather than hoping for increased accuracy alone, it should be hoped that the types of errors learners are making should change as they acquire new language structures and go on to make errors on more complicated ones. Thus, if the accuracy remains constant over time and the complexity increases, this shows that learners are working in Vygotsky's (1986) "zone of proximal development" and successfully developing their interlanguage.

Which should be valued more, accuracy or complexity? It seems that some balance needs to be found. Such a balance entails a gradual increase in complexity over time and

accuracy which fluctuates little or remains equal. Few studies, if any, have sought to take complexity into account when measuring the effects of feedback on writing.

### Literature Review

Many language development studies, such as those mentioned by Guenette (2007) and Truscott (2007), have focused on improvement in learners' writing associated with error feedback. However, the complexity of the realities of language development may complicate findings and conclusions.

Firstly, the question of what to give feedback on has been debated. Some contend that focused feedback which applies to just one, or a few, particular language forms is the most efficient (Fazio, 2001; Ferris, 1999; Sheen, 2007). Further issues include how to decide which language form to focus on and who should make this decision. Others feel that focused feedback is too limited to improve a learner's writing skills and that they need unfocused feedback on a number of errors in order to improve.

Next, the issue of how much feedback is appropriate has been discussed. Should every instance of an error be pointed out or just those that obscure the meaning of the writing? In addition, there is a further issue as to what form the feedback should be given in. Direct feedback is sometimes called "error correction" and entails the teacher actually writing the correct forms for the student. There are varying degrees of indirect feedback such as (a) indicating both the location and type of the error but leaving the student to decide how to correct it, (b) indicating the type of error but not the location and leaving the student to find the error, (c) indicating the location of the error but not the type and leaving the student to establish what the error is, (d) indicating which line the error occurs in but not the type or exact location and leaving the student to locate where exactly on the line the error is and what it is, (e) indicating which line the error occurs on and the type of error and leaving the student to infer where exactly on the line the error is and how to correct it, as well as many other variations.

Furthermore, there has been discussion about what constitutes improvement in writing ability. Some studies have looked at improvement between the drafts of one composition (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) while others have looked at improvement between instances of writing (Kepner, 1991; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998).

Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) aptly state that:

One of the central themes of second language research has been the study of learner errors as a reflection of hypothesis testing on the part of second language learners. Eventually, the attention...moved away from the analysis of errors in their own right as indications of hypothesis testing and interlanguage development to concern with questions relating to the potential effects of corrective procedures on language learning. (p. 465)

Anderson, Benson, and Lynch (2001) state that if learners always focus on the communication of ideas rather than on the language forms they are using to communicate

those ideas, they tend to resort to lexical chunks which are stored in their memory and (over) used to communicate many different meanings. The deployment of such lexical chunks over the long term leads to their language becoming fossilized. They argue that it is the analysis and reanalysis of a learner's current interlanguage that leads to language development.

In a similar manner, Hyland and Hyland (2006) state that:

Many studies of feedback on error have ignored how language acquisition occurs, although the influence of feedback on the learner's long-term writing development fits closely with SLA research. SLA studies indicate that second language acquisition takes place gradually over time and that mistakes are an important part of the highly complex developmental process of acquiring the target language. In fact, there may be a U-shaped course of development (Ellis, 1997) where learners are initially able to use the correct forms, only to regress later, before finally using them according to the target language norms. We cannot, in other words, expect that a target form will be acquired either immediately or permanently after it has been highlighted through feedback. Even though explicit feedback can play an important role in second language acquisition, it needs time and repetition before it can help learners to notice correct forms, compare these with their own interlanguage and test their hypotheses about the target language. Attempting to establish a direct relationship between corrective feedback and successful acquisition of a form is, therefore, over-simplistic and highly problematic. (p. 85)

Although a disproportionate number of studies have been conducted on feedback in writing compared to other aspects of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, there have been various limitations with many of the studies, meaning that there is still little known about what kind of effect feedback has on writing, or even whether it has any effect at all. In a meta-analysis of research on error feedback on writing, Truscott (2007) outlined some of the limitations. He states that different studies include different kinds of errors in the category of "grammatical errors," many studies lack a control group, and many studies test at the end of the treatment period but not at the beginning. Guenette (2007) looks specifically at research design issues in feedback research. She states that many studies find positive effects of feedback in the short term, whereas longitudinal studies would be more conclusive. Furthermore, many studies compare two classes of students, meaning that other differences cannot be controlled for.

Studies which have looked at focused feedback presume that all of the participants are ready to acquire the form being focused on and that none of them have acquired the form. There are many reasons to believe that it is highly unlikely that all participants in a study will be ready to acquire the same form at the same time; therefore, a more student-centered approach to feedback is necessary. On the other hand, studies assessing the effect of unfocused feedback tend to seek an increase in accuracy, ignoring the idea that increased accuracy is likely to occur at the expense of complexity.

This pilot study presupposes that there is a balance to be found between accuracy and complexity and attempts to quantify the repetition of errors between two groups of university

students: one group that was given feedback on both errors and content and another group that was given feedback on content alone.

### Method

The present study was carried out for one 12-week semester in a 90-minute writing class with first-year English majors in a private university in Chiba, Japan. Students were asked to submit a weekly journal. In the first semester, feedback on content alone was given, as the purpose of the journal writing was to increase fluency rather than to focus on form. However, a number of students in the class requested that the teacher give error feedback in addition to feedback on content in the second semester. As a result of this request, in the second semester one group of students (N = 13) was given feedback on content while another was given indirect feedback on grammatical and spelling errors in addition to feedback on content (N = 8). The errors made by the two groups were analyzed, and repetitions of the same errors on subsequent instances of writing were counted.

A repetition score was calculated for each student. The repetition score was the average number of times each different error occurred throughout the 11-week period divided by the number of journal entries submitted by the student. For example, Student 1 made each different error on average 1.6 times and submitted 11 journal entries in total over the 11-week period. Therefore, the repetition figure for Student 1 is 0.1464 (1.61 divided by 11). All repetition scores were calculated and rounded to four decimal places.

Repetition of the same error within a single journal entry was not counted as it is natural that students make the same mistake repeatedly within one entry. Instead, repetition was counted across entries to see whether the indirect feedback actually led to a reduction of the instances of each particular error on which feedback was given. If the raw average number of repetitions were used, students who submitted fewer journal entries would be unfairly advantaged in that even if they made the same mistake in every entry their average repetition score would be low just by virtue of having submitted fewer journal entries. Dividing the average number of repetitions by the total number of journal entries submitted by the student controlled for that factor. A t-test was run using SPSS to find out whether there was any significant difference in the number of repetitions of each error between the treatment group and the control group.

### Results and Discussion

As can be seen in Table 1, the repetition scores of the treatment group were significantly lower than those of the control group. This indicates that the treatment group made significantly fewer repetitions of the same types of errors in subsequent journal entries when compared with the control group.

Table 1.  
*Repetition Scores*

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
Treatment	8	0.136337	0.018475	0.026668	0.032*
Control	13	0.163005	0.028945		

\*Significant at the 0.05 level

Table 2.  
*Journal Entry Length*

Period	Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Treatment	8	147.5413	40.11569	58.68279	0.001*
	Control	13	88.8585	30.91753		
2	Treatment	8	162.5413	89.48789	72.73279	0.019*
	Control	13	89.8085	40.17101		
3	Treatment	8	170.1038	68.36247	50.47529	0.214
	Control	13	119.6285	96.61885		
4	Treatment	8	152.9163	71.30333	18.51856	0.598
	Control	13	134.3977	77.92319		

\*Significant at the 0.05 level

It could be argued that dividing the number of repetitions fails to account for the length of each journal entry. It seems logical that a student who writes more is likely to have more errors by virtue of the quantity of writing alone. However, dividing the number of repetitions of each error by the number of words produced fails to account for the feedback given between journal entries. In research on feedback on writing, instances of writing are typically used as the unit because it is only between instances of writing that learners receive feedback. That is, if the feedback is the reason for the reduction in errors (or for the reduction in repetitions of the same errors) then the reduction will be found in subsequent instances of writing and not in subsequent words.

However, length of journal entries may point to a difference in motivation and/or overall proficiency. Furthermore, it has been found in previous studies (such as by Semke, 1984) that giving feedback to students had the effect of decreasing fluency, resulting in less output from feedback groups when compared with control groups. Therefore, a further analysis was carried out to ascertain whether there was any significant difference between the two groups in terms of the length of journal entries. For this analysis, the data was collapsed into four time periods, each consisting of three weeks. Every student submitted their journal at least

once in each three-week period, and the average length of the journal entries in that period was used if journal entries were written more than once during the three-week period. As can be seen in Table 2, the journal entries of the treatment group in the first two time periods were significantly longer than those of the control group. In the third and fourth time periods, the treatment group's journal entries were also longer, although the difference was not significant.

Although, based on the findings of studies such as Semke's (1984), it might be expected that the treatment group would decrease the length of their journal entries over time, no significant decrease took place in the entry length of the treatment group in this study. Furthermore, it would seem that a longer journal entry offers more opportunity for repetition of errors than does a shorter one. However, the treatment group wrote more than the control group in every period, strengthening the finding of decreased repetition of errors in subsequent journal entries.

### Conclusion

Clearly, language acquisition is not a cumulative linear process and it therefore cannot be predicted when a certain form will become learnable for a certain learner. Specifically in the context of journal writing in which there are no drafts, a perfect piece of writing is not a reasonable goal. Feedback in the process approach to writing is different in that the students can use the feedback on drafts to improve their writing between drafts. In such a case, the overall goal is a reasonable level of accuracy in the final draft. On the other hand, in journal writing the goal is for the feedback to affect students' writing in the long term; that is, to facilitate the development of their interlanguage. From the significantly lower repetition scores of the students in the treatment group of this study, it appears that the feedback may have had the effect of limiting the number of times students made the same errors in subsequent journal entries. This would seem to indicate that students were taking notice of the feedback and it was indeed affecting language development in the long term.

Language learners are in the process of developing their language skills. Because of this, there are always going to be errors in the language forms of language learners and error-free writing is therefore an unreasonable goal. The number of errors may decrease in time as their English proficiency level gets higher, but it is unlikely to decrease so dramatically that we could see a reduction in the number of errors in a learner's writing over the period of a study, even with a longitudinal study spanning a 10- or 15-week semester. Rather than looking for a decrease in the number of errors, we should be looking for a change in the type of errors being made. If we can see that the learners, rather than making the same errors repeatedly between different instances of writing, are making different types of errors, that is the manifestation of the development of interlanguage. That is, the errors that the students were making previously that they are no longer making, are now forms that have been acquired. That is not to say that the students are not making errors, but rather they are making new errors. These new errors are the next forms that they will be able to get feedback on and therefore have the chance to acquire next. This is the role of unfocused feedback, to help

students in the development of their interlanguage rather than to create perfectly error-free writing.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This pilot study has several major limitations which need to be taken into account in the design of future studies. The main limitation of this study is the size of the groups. Statistical procedures such as a t-test, are designed for larger groups, so these results are not reliable. However, the tendencies that are shown by this pilot study do suggest that a large-scale study using the same approach would be a worthwhile endeavor.

Furthermore, the groups in this pilot study were self-selected. As a result of this, it is reasonable to believe that it was the more motivated and hardworking students who asked for feedback. This in turn also means that they were more likely to have paid attention to that feedback. It is reasonable to believe that students who are not as confident or motivated are likely to not have asked for feedback. Indeed, the differences in journal-entry length seem to support this idea. Moreover, if the students in the control group had been given feedback, they would possibly have paid less attention to it and therefore the same results may not have been found. What the results of this study seem to suggest is that given motivated students who want feedback there is further benefit involved in giving feedback beyond fulfilling the students' expectations. Some actual improvement of their writing skills may be able to be found. It would be very interesting to see whether, if students were randomly selected for the same two treatments, the same effect would be observed.

Also, the significant difference in repetition could be attributable to avoidance. If a student receives indirect feedback on a particular form and is unclear as to what kind of mistake has been made or how to correct the error, it is reasonable to believe that he or she may avoid using that form in the future in order to avoid getting the same feedback again. If we are to be sure that this did not happen, analysis needs to include not only errors but also correct usage of the same language forms. Thus, it is recommended that future studies include a full analysis of all language usage, both correct and erroneous.

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