The effectiveness of comprehensive corrective feedback in second language writing
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Linguistic challenges in multilingual classrooms

The connection between language and instruction is an inextricable one. Not only does language serve as the medium of knowledge transfer, but developing pupils' language proficiency is also a pedagogical goal in itself (e.g. Prenger, 2005). The language pupils encounter in school is usually more complex than the language used in informal settings, such as at home (e.g. Cummins, 1991; Schleppegrell, 2001; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). This makes that the linguistic demands learners face in an instructional setting are high, even for monolingual speakers of a given language (e.g. Henrichs, 2010). Yet, for pupils from immigrant backgrounds, for whom the instructional language is not their mother tongue, the linguistic challenges are even greater (e.g. Van Eerde & Hajer, 2008; Van Gelderen et al., 2003).

In the four largest cities of the Netherlands (i.e. Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht), on average 50% of the primary and secondary school pupils are from non-Dutch¹ language backgrounds (Hartgers, 2007). These children either migrated to the Netherlands early in life, or were born in this country but received little or no Dutch language input before they started attending school at the age of four. Research has shown that these pupils lag behind their native speaker peers in school success (e.g. Driessen, 2009; Gijsberts & Herweijer, 2009; Vallen & Stijnen, 1991). It has been claimed that one of the causes of this difference in overall school performance can be found in pupils' level of Dutch language proficiency (e.g. Gijsberts & Herweijer, 2009; Van Gelderen et al., 2003). Second language (L2) speakers of Dutch have shown to fall behind in a broad range of linguistic domains, such as vocabulary knowledge (e.g. Appel & Vermeer, 1998; Hacquebord, Linthorst, Stellingwerf, & De Zeeuw, 2004; Roeleveld & Béguin, 2009; Verhallen &

¹ Being the official language, Dutch is the most commonly used language of instruction in the Netherlands.
Schoonen, 1993), reading skills (e.g. Hacquebord et al., 2004; Roeleveld & Béguin, 2009), grammar knowledge (e.g. Hacquebord, 1989), and writing skills (e.g. Sijtstra, 1997).

The poor school performance of ethnic minority pupils in the Netherlands has furthermore been attributed to the increased linguistic demands learners are currently faced with; even mathematics is hardly a matter of numbers and formula’s anymore (e.g. Prenger, 2005; Van den Boer, 2003; Van Eerde & Hajer, 2008). Without the necessary linguistic repertoire, pupils might fail to understand and acquire the content that is being presented to them, or fall short in successfully communicating their own knowledge and ideas. A lack of language proficiency could thus become a stumbling block for content learning (e.g. Prenger, 2005; Van den Boer, 2003).

From the above it was concluded that – in the multilingual reality of Dutch schools – there is a strong need for extra attention to language, not only in language-orientated classes, but also in other classes where the overriding focus is on content (e.g. Prenger, 2005; Van den Boer, 2003; Van Eerde & Hajer, 2008). An instructional paradigm which addresses this need is the language-sensitive approach to content teaching (e.g. Hajer & Meestringa, 2004; Van Eerde & Hajer, 2008). Among the spearheads of this approach are the necessity to provide learners with enough opportunity to engage in productive language use, and the need for language-related feedback. The present empirical work was conducted in Dutch multilingual secondary schools adopting this language sensitive methodology.

1.2 Writing in a second language

One of the options for promoting productive language use in an instructional setting is requiring pupils to write. Even in one’s native language, writing a good text has been claimed to be a cognitively demanding task, because one has to simultaneously pay attention to the text’s content, its structure, its formulation, and its linguistic adequacy (e.g. Kellog, 1994; Schoonen et al., 2003). In order to create a text that meets the requirements on all of those aspects, writers have to engage in a constant cycle of planning, formulating, reading, and revising their text (e.g. Flower & Hayes 1980; 1981; Van den Berg & Rijlaarsdam, 1996). Producing a text in a language which is not your mother tongue should be considered even more demanding. Whereas formulating grammatically correct sentences tends to be an automatized process in one’s first language (L1), this is not the case in an L2 (e.g. Zimmerman, 2000). As a result, L2 writers are forced to direct more of
their attention to language form, leaving fewer cognitive resources for the other aspects of their writing, such as content or text structure (e.g. Cumming, 2001; McCutchen, 2000; Roca de Larios, Manchón, & Murphy, 2006). One of the tasks L2 teachers thus face, is guiding their students through the difficult process of becoming able writers in the target language. This perspective on L2 writing can be referred to as learning-to-write.

While writing in an L2 has been argued to be cognitively challenging, it can at the same time be considered of vital importance to L2 development. Current views on second language acquisition (SLA) implicate that it is not enough to expose learners to abundant L2 input, and that learners also need to be pushed to actively use and produce the target language (e.g. Ellis, 2003; 2005; Skehan, 1995; Swain, 1985; 1995). Learners’ active manipulation of language forms, functions, and concepts is thought to play a crucial role in their language learning process, because output production forces learners to process language more deeply and with more mental effort than is necessary during listening and reading (Van Eerde & Hajer, 2008). Having learners engage in L2 writing can thus be considered a means to learn the language. The focus of this book is on this writing-to-learn dimension of L2 writing.

1.3 Corrective feedback in second language writing

Both L2 researchers (e.g. Han, 2002; Havranek, 2002; Swain, 1991) and practitioners (e.g. Hajer & Meestringa, 2004) have claimed that, in order for output production to foster L2 acquisition, it should be accompanied by feedback on language form. The most commonly used feedback type targeting linguistic problems is error correction or corrective feedback (CF). CF is a method of providing negative feedback, which could be defined as “any indication to the learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 197). There are many different ways of supplying CF on L2 learners’ writing. CF methodologies may vary, for example, with respect to their explicitness, their focus, the person providing the feedback, the feedback medium, etcetera. Table 1.1 supplies an overview of the most common written CF strategies.

Even though most teachers, students, and researchers (e.g. Ferris, 1999) agree that CF on learners’ output has an important place in L2 (writing) instruction, some academics (e.g. Truscott, 1996) have claimed CF to be ineffective and potentially harmful. As a result, the exact role of correction in L2 development has been heavily debated in the field of SLA. Questions such as if, how, and when CF works, what type of CF to use, and which errors to
correct, are yet to be answered by empirical research. The studies presented in this dissertation intended to contribute to the settlement of these issues.

Table 1.1 Methodologies of providing written corrective feedback (adapted from Ellis 2009a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written CF methodologies</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unfocused or comprehensive CF</td>
<td>All errors in a learner’s text are corrected by the teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused or selective CF</td>
<td>The teacher selects one (or a few) type(s) of error(s) to correct. Errors outside the chosen focus domain are left uncorrected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct CF</td>
<td>The teacher provides both an indication of the errors as well as the corresponding target forms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect CF</td>
<td>The teacher provides some indication of the errors, but it is left to the learner to derive the target forms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Indication + location</td>
<td>a. Errors are underlined or error codes(^2) are inserted in the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Indication only</td>
<td>b. The number of errors is indicated in the margin, without reference of their location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-linguistic CF</td>
<td>Learners are supplied with meta-linguistic descriptions of their errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformulation</td>
<td>The teacher gives a grammatically accurate reformulation of a learner’s text, while staying as close to the original as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic CF</td>
<td>Learners are provided with computer-mediated feedback; in-text hyperlinks supply information on the nature of the errors, correct usage, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer feedback</td>
<td>A learner’s text is corrected by a fellow student instead of by the teacher.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1.4 Focus of the present research

The studies reported in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this thesis set out to investigate the effectiveness of CF in improving L2 learners’ writing. More specifically, they explored the effect of error correction on learners’ ability to write texts that are linguistically accurate. The

\(^2\) In his table Ellis (2009a) labelled the use of error codes as meta-linguistic CF. In a different paper (Ellis, 2009b), however, he categorized the coding of errors under indirect error correction. In the present work the latter classification was chosen, since – in my opinion – the fact that learners are expected to use the provided codes to self-correct their errors is the most important property of this CF strategy.
studies were conducted in Dutch multilingual secondary schools within the Randstad area\(^3\) that adopted a language sensitive approach to content instruction. The main issues that are addressed in the empirical chapters of this thesis are summarized below. The empirical and theoretical rationale behind these issues will be discussed in Chapter 2.

1. Is written CF an effective editing tool?
2. Does written CF lead to accuracy development in L2 writing?
3. What type of written CF is most effective?
4. What factors mediate the effectiveness of written CF?
5. Does written CF come with any negative side-effects that harm accuracy development?
6. How and when do individual learners (fail to) benefit from written CF?

1.5 **Descriptions and operationalizations of main concepts**

This section provides a brief overview of the central concepts in this thesis. Since the main objective of the present empirical work was to explore the role of written CF in the process of acquiring an L2, I will start by introducing the cognitive perspective adopted in this book. Secondly, I will explain how CF and accuracy development were operationalized.

1.5.1 **A cognitive perspective on second language development**

The present work was framed within a cognitive perspective on second language development. In the cognitive paradigm, learning a second language is described as a process in which learners develop an *interlanguage* system based on their experience with L2 input (e.g. Han, 2002). *Input* refers to all the target language material a learner is exposed to, either orally or visually (Gass, 1997). However, not all available language input will result in acquisition. Only the subset of L2 input that has been mentally processed by the learner will contribute to L2 development. This subset is referred to as L2 *intake*. The interlanguage system that develops through intake then enables L2 learners to produce linguistic *output*. A learner’s interlanguage is viewed to be independent of both his L1 as well as from the target language system, with its own grammar, lexicon, etcetera (Selinker, 1972). In this perspective, errors in learners’ output should be seen as natural and

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\(^3\) The Randstad is a conglomeration of the four largest cities in the Netherlands; that is Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht.
indispensable parts of the L2 acquisition process. Figure 1.1 visualizes the language learning process.

Figure 1.1 A cognitive model of L2 acquisition (adapted from VanPatten & Sanz, 1995)

1.5.2 Corrective feedback
As stated previously, CF could be defined as any indication to a learner that his use of a target language form is incorrect. The correction types under investigation in this thesis are a direct and an indirect form of comprehensive, teacher initiated CF (cf. Table 1.1). In the present work, comprehensive direct CF was operationalized as identification of all existing linguistic errors and provision of the corresponding target forms. Comprehensive indirect CF took the form of identifying every error in a learner’s text by means of providing an error code corresponding to the relevant error category.

1.5.3 Accuracy development
The present work opted to explore the ways in which CF affects L2 learners' ability to produce target-like output. Therefore, the accuracy of learners’ writing was the main dependent variable in the present research. Accuracy was defined as the target-like use of language forms (i.e. grammar, lexis, and orthography).

The effects of CF on L2 accuracy development were assessed in terms of whether or not learners exhibited differences in their ability to use target-like language in revisions and new pieces of writing, as a function of being subjected to a CF or a non-CF treatment. It needs to be noted that the terms L2 development, acquisition, and learning are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.
1.6 Thesis outline

The remainder of this thesis consists of a literature review, three empirical studies, a chapter discussing the main findings and implications of the present research, and a short overall summary (both in English and Dutch):

Chapter 2 draws up the theoretical and empirical framework for the research presented in this thesis. It summarizes the theoretical arguments underpinning the use of CF in L2 classrooms, reviews the controversies surrounding the role of CF in L2 learning, and provides a critical summary of the findings produced by earlier research. The chapter concludes with the open issues that will be addressed in the following empirical chapters.

Chapter 3 reports the findings of a small-scale study (N = 66) investigating the effect of direct and indirect comprehensive CF on L2 learners’ writing. The study set out to explore the value of CF during revision, as well as its role in L2 accuracy development. The potential influences of a task’s topic and pupils’ language proficiency on the effectiveness of CF were also explored.

Chapter 4 presents a more extensive investigation (N = 268) into the efficacy of direct and indirect comprehensive error correction. This study again looked into the effects of CF on both learners’ revised and newly written texts. It furthermore included a second post-test to gain more insights into the durability of the effects brought about by error correction. Moreover, the study tested the differential value of CF for grammatical and non-grammatical errors, explored the influence of CF on the structural complexity and lexical diversity of learners’ writing, and examined the interaction between participants’ educational level and CF effectiveness.

In Chapter 5, the sequential writing performances of four L2 learners are submitted to an in-depth accuracy analysis. The objective of this qualitative exploration of CF effectiveness was to broaden the understanding on how learners engage with the CF they receive, and

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4 There is some overlap within Chapters 3 to 5, because these have all been published or submitted for publication in international journals. The advantage this offers the reader is that each chapter can be read on its own. It furthermore needs to be noted that – since Chapters 3 to 5 have multiple authors – the empirical chapters were written from a ‘we’-perspective, whereas the other chapters were not.
on when correction is (not) beneficial to pupils’ accuracy development. The study also set out to provide a more detailed account of the CF responsiveness of different error types.

Chapter 6 presents the overall conclusions distilled from the empirical work reported on in the previous chapters. It also sketches out the theoretical and practical implications of the present findings, and outlines some limitations of the present studies that need to be addressed in future research.

The English and Dutch summaries at the end of this book provide a synopsis of the background and rationale behind the work at hand, the three empirical studies, and their main conclusions and implications.