Chapter 1
Introduction to Written Corrective Feedback for L2 Development

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, written CF is defined, and then how written CF can contribute to each of the three stages of L2 development is presented. By comparing corrective feedback in a written context to an oral context, the conclusion is made that written context is a better platform for L2 development. After presenting the underpinning theoretical frameworks, including information processing theories and socio-cultural theories, this chapter provides the research findings up to date to prove the effectiveness of written CF provided in both of the approaches. Last but not the least, this chapter highlights the questions remained in this field, which justifies the necessity and importance of further written CF research.

THE BACKGROUND OF WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK RESEARCH

Written corrective feedback (written CF) in second/foreign language (L2) writing, also known as error correction or grammar correction (Truscott, 1996, 2007), has been much studied and debated over the past 20 years. The zest for written CF research may originally have come from the L2 classroom where teachers need to know whether and how to deal with students’ errors in their written texts. However, the significance of written CF research has

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extended beyond pedagogy and L2 teaching and received great attention from theorists in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). On the one hand, the benefits of CF have been found in the oral context (see Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2006; Russell & Spada, 2006), thus whether CF in the written context could benefit L2 learning in the same way needs to be examined. On the other hand, the features of the written context may portray a clearer picture of L2 learning than in the oral context. Written CF is provided after the completion of written output and has long-lasting remark, thus it is more likely to be noticed and used by L2 learners than oral CF. Besides, the slow pace of writing could provide sufficient time for L2 learners to refer to written CF in subsequent writing. Therefore, written CF may provide a better platform to observe and conceptualize L2 learning.

Research over the last two decades has found the effectiveness of written CF on a few simple linguistic forms (e.g. two uses of English articles and past tense), but whether it could facilitate the development of more complicated linguistic forms needs to be investigated. Besides, the differing variables and contradictory findings in these studies have made researchers start to investigate potential mediating factors on the effectiveness of written CF. Well-designed written CF studies based on sound SLA theories are needed to address these issues. Theoretically, written CF is supposed to facilitate L2 development; however, what is L2 development and what kind of written CF could facilitate L2 development is understood very differently in the cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives of SLA.

UNDERSTANDING WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN COGNITIVE ACCOUNT OF SLA

Cognitive theorists believe that L2 learning goes through three largely sequential macro-processes, including knowledge internalization, knowledge modification and knowledge consolidation (Housen and Pierrard, 2005) (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Three stages of L2 development (Housen and Pierrard, 2005)
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