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# Is less more? – some research findings on response to second language writing

Är det någon vits med att rätta språkfel i elevers uppsatser i främmande språk? Denna för alla språklärare centrala fråga ligger till grund för följande forskningsöversikt. Moira Linnarud är professor i engelsk språkvetenskap vid Karlstads universitet.

## Introduction

Refining and improving ways of giving response to learners' writing is a major concern for most language teachers. Response to second language learners' writing has its own special problems as the writer's language competence can vary from native-like to almost non-existent. Unfortunately there is not much consensus in the academic world as to the best way to give response to writing and if it actually makes any difference at all. If it, in fact, has no substantial effect on the learner's progress it is, of course, a monumental waste of time.

The issue of response to writing and the respective merits of teacher response and the alternatives, peer response or no response at all have been the centre of much attention in research into writing in a second language. Here I will focus on a few of the studies dealing with these issues.

## Output and interaction

The lack of certainty as to the best way to incorporate writing into the second language learning process is symptomatic of a general uncertainty as to how second language learning actually takes place. How the learner struggles, or more optimistically, rolls along the road towards acquisition of a second language has been and still is a matter for speculation. As yet there is no proof as to which theory adequately describes the driving force and the social circumstances that best promote acquisition. For an overview of this area see Mitchell and Myles (1998). Interaction, however, where the learner participates in a communicative process, plays an important part in most theories of how language is learned. From a socio-cultural perspective, interaction provides scaffolding from the more experienced participant which enables the learner to appropriate the information and eventually internalise it (Vygotsky 1962, Wood et al 1976, Lantolf 1994, Lantolf & Appel 1994).

There is also emphasis in more recent theories on learners having to produce comprehensible output which makes some demands on them and pushes them to develop their proficiency. As Swain (1985:249) states, learners should be pushed to move beyond what they would normally produce. This forces them to try out hypotheses about how the language works and the teacher's or other feedback confirms or disproves the hypothesis. In this way progress is made.

Through interaction and the response of others to their output, learners are provided with both positive and negative evidence as to the structure, vocabulary and communicative rules of the L2. The role of negative evidence, where the learner is made aware that his or her interlanguage contains error, is an important one. In spite of doubts as to the effectiveness of correction it would seem obvious that an incorrect form which is never recognised as being incorrect, is at clear risk of fossilisation, making it difficult or impossible to eradicate at a later date. Although avoiding error is far from the only goal of the language classroom there is clear evidence that errors have a negative effect on evaluations of learners' written production (Linnarud 1986).

The place where the learner of a foreign language in Sweden has the greatest chance of interacting in that language is undoubtedly the classroom. This applies to English as well as French, German and Spanish and other languages. Although there is a vast amount of input available in English in the media there is not much opportunity for interaction making use of that input. It is a problem, however, that the teacher has a large number of pupils in a normal classroom situation. This means that the amount of time for interaction one-to-one is severely limited.

The teacher is, of course, not the sole source of response. The peer group is, for instance, often used as a source of comments on writing. Pupils interact with other pupils and in the process can reach conclusions that they would not have reached individually. These conclusions may be right or wrong according to the rules of the target language, but the interaction has at least given the learner opportunity to produce output. Somewhere, however, there has to be a participant in the communication who has knowledge and experience enough to be the scaffolder, who can give appropriate response to help the learner to make progress. This scaffolder in the final instance is often the teacher. Now we are back to the question of how interaction in relation to the learner's written output actually affects the learner's progress.

## Correcting errors

The skill to interact with learners in order to help them progress towards an improved version of a written text is not always easy to acquire. This is an area where, for instance, teacher trainees often express doubts as to their ability to give response (see e.g. Drew 1997). The practical problems that occur for teachers of English as a second language even in simply correcting errors in learner writing are brought up by Truscott (1996). Truscott also holds the strong view that error correction in second language writing is a waste of time and leads to no improvement. This is based on

the idea that language acquisition is a process of gradual development which cannot be affected by external suggestions for corrections. There are, of course, other aspects of learners' writing than grammatical correctness but Truscott confines the discussion to the area of grammar.

Ferris (1999) draws the conclusion, in contrast to Truscott, that many students can actually improve their writing if the feedback is given well. The fact that all students do not improve from error correction should not lead us to discard it. On the contrary, time should be devoted to making correction as effective as possible. Learners must be encouraged to improve their own editing skills. For this to happen they must be made aware of the state of their L2. No negative evidence that points out that there is a problem may lead the learner to believe that there is no problem. Why wait for them to discover positive evidence in input which may lead them to suspect that their developing interlanguage contains an idiosyncracy?

The task of giving response is, however, recognised to be a difficult one. Ferris is none the less optimistic that a tutorial program on how to find, identify and correct errors can give rise to great improvement in response-giving skills. This was the case for 12 MA TESOL students who participated in a ten-week tutorial program. Ferris is referring to the actual mechanics of teaching native speakers of English to identify learners' errors. The task of identifying and correcting learners' errors was of such magnitude that a ten-week course was necessary for them to be able to function well in the role of response giver. It is an important point that giving response to learners' writing is a skill that needs to be practised.

One way of making response more effective is that teachers must prioritise which errors they deal with. As Ferris (1999:7) puts it, this will prevent "the inevitable teacher burn-out and overload that results from trying to deal with every single problem in every student paper." Ferris points out that there is a difference in the kind of response required to systematic grammatical errors, where the learner can apply rules, and lexical errors. In most cases of lexical errors direct correction is needed and very little can be generalised (Ferris 1999:6).

The non-systematic nature of lexical errors makes their correction a difficult task for the non-native teacher. Linnarud (2002, 2002a) points out that it is in this area of response that student teachers have the most difficulty. Errors such as concord where there are clear grammatical rules were most often identified and corrected by a group of student teachers who were asked to rewrite a school learner's composition and improve it in any way they chose. Greater problems were caused by lexical errors which were often not identified, such as *basket* for *basketball*, or difficult to interpret, such as *lightgates* in connection with protecting your home from burglars.

## Peer group and/or teacher response

In process oriented writing classes feedback from the peer group is a central part of the method. The question often arises as to the effects of this kind of response. The peer group is obviously at different stages in the learning process. Some may be more proficient than the teacher, others much less. As we have seen it is a difficult task even for a native speaker to give response without special training. It is therefore interesting to see that several studies have found peer response to lead to improvements in learners' writing. A study by Chaudron (1984) showed that there was no significant difference between the improvement which resulted from peer feedback and that which resulted from teacher feedback. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) even found that compositions receiving only peer group feedback improved more than those with feedback from the teacher only. Teachers' feedback resulted in improvement in grammar, while peer response resulted in more changes in content, organisation and vocabulary.

Paulus (1999) carried out a study of peer and teacher feedback where she draws the conclusion that instructors' written feedback can in fact be used by the students to make meaning-level revisions and not only to correct grammar. Revision and re-writing with the help of feedback from peers and teachers did result in better compositions. Berg (1999), however, adds the warning that peer response has to be trained for it to have a positive effect.

There is also research which shows that many learners prefer feedback from the teacher and consider it more reliable particularly regarding response to grammatical errors. This in turn means that for these students teacher feedback leads to more revisions than peer feedback (Tsui & Ng 2000; Zhang, 1995). Students who incorporated a low percentage of peer suggestions did not have confidence in their peers as non-native speakers of the language. Others thought it was valuable to have response from several people although they did not rely on the judgement of the peer group regarding grammatical correctness.

According to Tsui & Ng (2000) there were four main benefits of using peer response regardless of how much their comments affected the actual improvements made in the text. The learners felt that the peer group provided a real audience for the writing. They also felt that they became aware of their own errors by seeing them in other learners' texts. A third point was that the interaction with the others in the group gave them a chance to negotiate meaning more effectively, in collaboration. The fourth point is fostering ownership of the text. Peer comments can be ignored more easily than teacher comments thus leading to a greater sense of ownership of the text for the writer. In the long term this makes the students more independent and more confident in themselves as writers.

For peer response to be successful the teacher has to present both giving and receiving response as part of the learning process. The teacher must

also be aware that peer discourse can contain elements of 'tactical resistance' to use Diamondstone's (1999:135) term for a situation where the participants are manoeuvering for a favourable position in the group. Diamonstone also talks about the 'third space' or 'opportunity space' where marginalized students have a chance to take a more central place in literacy practices, such as writing. If teachers wish to make use of the 'third space' in the classroom they need to be aware of struggles within the group and also be aware of the more dominant students' techniques of making the group serve their interests. The teacher must integrate all students in the discourse and prevent or reduce marginalisation in peer group discussions.

## Clarity of comments

In general there is a fear that negative comments made by the teacher about learners' writing may have a detrimental effect on motivation and hinder rather than facilitate progress. Hyland and Hyland (2001) found, however, that many teachers 'sugar the pill' by the use of hedging devices and question forms so that the learners found it very hard to understand the comments at all. It is, of course, important for learners to feel as if they are succeeding but many learners in the study felt that comments such as 'It is interesting' were meaningless. They wanted to know their weaknesses. Students vary considerably, of course, in their attitudes to positive comments. Some appreciate them and others dismiss them as mitigation devices. Hyland and Hyland draw the conclusion that positive comments need to be specific rather than in terms of general praise and adds that the ways in which we frame our comments as teachers can both lead to improvements and confuse and dishearten the learner. The teacher needs to ensure that feedback is clear and helpful without merely trying to be encouraging.

There are, of course, other ways of developing writing other than the writing of traditional compositions. The portfolio method is one alternative. The learner's various different written tasks are saved and teachers' comments can be regarded as suggestions rather than commands as they are not use directly in assessment of the learner's proficiency. Richardson (2000), however, points out that many students still see the teacher's comments as directives leaving them no alternative. The teachers in her study had, in contrast, adopted a more informal and relaxed attitude to giving response and were unaware that the students still expected the teacher to show them the 'correct' way to write. This underlines that teachers need to be clear about how learners read their responses.

## Immersion is not enough

There is a belief that learners who are immersed in a second language as the language of communication in a school situation will learn that second language without any real effort. In Canada, where immersion education

has its roots, there are many studies of the realities of bilingual education. Kowal & Swain (1997) discuss the problems of developing immersion pupils' syntactic processing. In the natural communicative situation that exists in the immersion classroom, learners seemingly quickly learn semantic processing. They learn to understand the message, either spoken or written, but do not necessarily develop further in their understanding of how words function together in structures. Another way of developing writing is presented by Kowal and Swain as a way of helping the learners towards an informed discussion of syntax. The learners listened to a text without making notes and then listened once more, making notes particularly on one aspect of grammar, say examples of the present tense. They then were asked to rewrite the text in groups. There was ample evidence of scaffolding in the discussions. The texts were written on overheads and some were discussed. The final feedback on how things had worked out was an important part of the process. The task, dictogloss, was found to increase the learners awareness of syntactic processing. The evidence in the form of recordings of the discussions showed that it was a good method of improving the learners' syntactic processing abilities.

An important point made by Kowal and Swain is that the groups functioned much better if they were homogeneous. If there was too large a gap between the more advanced and less advanced learners there was not so much scaffolding as their zones of proximal development, ZPDs, lay too far from each other. The ZPD is the a term used to describe 'the difference between the child's developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky 1978:85). In more homogeneous groups both advanced and less advanced learners communicated more successfully.

The above study underlines an important point. Learning by scaffolding has to work both ways in a peer group. One cannot expect a good learner to play some kind of role as a helping hand if that learner is not going to develop in the process. The only scaffolder we can expect to do a good job at a level far below their own is the teacher.

## Conclusions

Common to all the research on response to writing referred to above is that the providers of feedback, regardless of whether they are native-speakers of the language or members of the peer group, need training in order for the response to be accurate and appropriate. The teachers' feedback deals with grammatical errors to a greater extent then the peer response and learners have more confidence in the teacher's ability to provide this response. This is an important aspect of writing as a correct composition is to be preferred to the same composition including errors. If the learners are to be provided

with negative evidence to help them to correct their grammatical errors, the teacher is the main source of this evidence. There are, of course, many other aspects of writing where peer response is valuable, not least in providing interaction and negotiation of meaning. It also fosters the learner's sense of ownership of the text.

The focus here has been on response to writing as a means of assisting the learner on the long and uncertain path towards whatever goal has been set in the second language classroom. The role of comprehensible output and interaction has been emphasised. Interaction assumes several participants and the learners' perspectives are important. The intentions of the teacher may not match the students' interpretations of the response. As Murphy (2000:79) says, a sociocultural perspective on learning sees knowledge 'neither as something that can be handed down ready made, nor something that can be constructed by individuals on their own. Rather it is viewed as being socially constructed in interactive processes, and in school, intimately wedded to the activities in which teachers and students engage.' The writing class is the ideal situation for the mutual construction of knowledge.

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