Perspectives on Error and Written Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition and Composition Studies

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Abstract— Theories of Second Language Acquisition view learning differently and see errors from different perspectives. Based on these views, different implications and recommendations have been made for practitioners (students, teachers, textbook writers and syllabus designers) and researchers. This paper aims to highlight the theoretical debate about error and written corrective feedback basically in Second Language Acquisition and composition studies. This analytical review shows that there are different perspectives of error and written feedback. Such a review can serve as solid background for practitioners and researchers willing to embark on empirical studies on issues related to feedback and errors in particular and language learning in general.

Keywords— composition studies, error, second language acquisition, and written corrective feedback.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to provide an overview on the theoretical account on error and written corrective feedback in both second language acquisition (SLA) research and composition studies. SLA theories are reviewed first before moving to examining the views embraced by composition studies research.

I. PERSPECTIVES ON ERROR AND WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN SLA

A lot of research has been done to account for first language acquisition (L1) and how to facilitate L2 learning. Different views have been proposed to account for how children acquire their L1. Findings of research in SLA have been based on both theoretical and empirical grounds. The focus here is on the theories that have clearly voiced their perspectives on error and error treatment and are considered relevant to the concerns of this study. Thus, in our review of these theories, we refer to *The Behaviorist Perspective, Krashen's Theory, The Cognitive Perspective*

(including three main models), *The Interactionist Perspective*, and *the Socio- Cultural Perspective*.

1.1 The Behaviorist Perspective

Views about errors have been evolving tremendously. During the 1950s and 1960s, errors were considered more negatively than they are today because they were seen to interfere with the learning process and therefore should be prevented from occurring. Behaviorists' accounts suggest that errors should not be tolerated or accepted. Behaviorists argue that they can be habit inevitably interfere with the learning of other habits (Bitchener& Ferris, 2012). However, although they acknowledge the role of corrective feedback when an incorrect response occurs, the focus of this approach is on error prevention instead of treatment.

Contrastive analysis was another approach which was meant to help teachers deal with or treat learners' errors. This approach was basically found on comparing elements of L1 and L2 in order to identify the features that differ in L2 from L1 so that negative transfer can be prevented. However, although research on contrastive

analysis has yielded interesting results about the sources of learners' errors, this approach was later criticized for its inability to account for errors L2 learners make.

At the same time, developments in the field of linguistics and psychology began to attract attention theorists who were seeking alternative answers to the sources of learners' errors and how these errors should be treated. In the field of linguistics, the structuralists' descriptions of the surface structures of the language were being replaced with generative account, focusing more on the rule – governed and creative nature of language. As for developments in psychology, the prominent role of the environment to shaping learners' language, advocated by Skinner, was giving way to a more developmental view promoted by Piaget (Bitchener&Ferris, 2012). Each of these developments was reflected in Chomsky's beliefs (1959)about how children acquire their L1. He argues that children do not learn and produce a large set of sentences but create new sentences that have never been heard before, and that they do this because they internalize rules rather than strings of words (Bitchener& Ferris, 2012). Krashen (1982, 1985) has found that adult as well as child learners of English as an L2 develop accuracy in a number of grammatical morphemes in a set order, irrespective of the learning context. From this, he concludes that the existence of such an order indicates the operation of internal principles. Based on these developments and the findings of L1 acquisition research, Krashen has formulated his theory which we are turning to in the next section.

1.2. Krashen's Theory

Krashen's theory (1981, 1982, 1984, 1985) was mainly based on developments in linguistics and psychology research. His general theory comprises five hypotheses, each of which has implications for the way error was viewed and the extent to which it is worth treating. These five hypotheses are briefly described as follows:

a) The Acquisition Learning Hypothesis: In this hypothesis, Krashen (1985) makes a distinction between "acquisition" and "learning," claiming that they are two separate processes. He refers to "acquisition" as the "subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language" and to "learning" as the "conscious process that results in 'knowing about' language" (p. 1). He saw "acquisition" occurring as a result of learners inter - acting in natural, meaningful communication and "learning" occurring as a result of classroom instruction and activities in which the learner's attention is focused on form.

b) The Monitor Hypothesis: He believes that the only function learning has is one that enables a learner to monitor or edit what is produced by the acquired system. As put by McLaughlin (1987), "the monitor is thought to alter the output of the acquired system before or after the utterance is actually written or spoken, but the utterance is initiated entirely by the acquired system" (p. 10). This means, therefore, that the monitor is able to operate when there is sufficient time (e.g., during written performance but not necessarily during oral performance), when a focus on accuracy is important to the learner, and when the learner has linguistic knowledge relevant to the form or structure in question. From both claims, it seems that Krashen (1985) does not totally rule out a role for error correction in the written context provided that the target linguistic error category has been acquired. On the other hand, he has not seen a role for error correction in either oral or written contexts if the linguistic form or structure is still being acquired.

c) The Natural Order Hypothesis: The third hypothesis states that learners acquire the rules of language in a predictable order, with some coming early and others coming late. According to Krashen (1985), the order does not appear to be determined solely by formal simplicity and the order is not dependent on the order in which rules are taught in language classes. Thus, he claims that there is no value to be gained from classroom instruction and, therefore, error correction, if one's focus is on subconscious acquisition of the target language. This further implies that a focus on error and its treatment in the classroom is not going to aid the acquisition process and consequently it should be regarded as unnecessary.

d) The Input Hypothesis: Arising from the natural order hypothesis is the Input Hypothesis. Here, Krashen (1985) claims that L2 learners move along the developmental continuum by receiving comprehensible input. By this, he means input about the target language that is just a little beyond the learner's current level of syntactic complexity. Consequently, he goes on to claim that, when learners are exposed to enough comprehensible input, there is no need for formal grammar instruction and thus, by implication, no need to focus a learner's attention on errors that have been made or to try to treat them in any way.

e) The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Building on the Input Hypothesis, Krashen's next hypothesis states that the input a learner is exposed to must be "taken in" and, for this to occur, a learner's affective filter must sufficiently be low.

Although Krashen's arguments have been highly influential in shaping the direction of subsequent theoretical perspectives and their associated research agendas, none of his hypotheses has escaped a significant degree of criticism.

1.3. The Cognitive Perspective

Bitchener and Ferris (2012) maintain that the information processing models, developed by MC Laughlin (1987, 1990) and Anderson (1983,1985), were mainly shaped by information processing models adopted by cognitive psychologists. "These models see SLA as a building up of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically by learners" (Bichener& Ferris, 2012, p. 12). These models basically include McLaughlin's Model, Anderson's model, and Pienmann's model.

Based on the view that complex behaviour builds on simple processes, McLaughlin (1987) argues that it is appropriate to also view second language learning in this light because it involves the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill. Mc Laughlin (1987) also confirms that:

To learn a second language is to learn a *skill*, because various aspects of the task must be practiced and integrated into fluent performance. This requires the automatization of component sub-skills. Learning is a *cognitive* process, because it is thought to involve internal representations that regulate and guide performance . . . As performance improves, there is constant restructuring as learners simplify, unify, and gain increasing control over their internal representations. These two notions—automatization and restructuring are central to cognitive theory. (pp.133-134)

As for the role of explicit instruction and corrective feedback, this model explains that they can play a significant role in the controlled phase and through practice and repeated activation and over time they can become automatized (Mc Laughlin, 1987).

Concerning Anderson's model (1993), Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) model is similar to McLaughlin's model in that it centers on the belief that practice leads to automatization. As Anderson (1993) puts it, *declarative knowledge* (knowledge *that*) can become *procedural knowledge* (knowledge *how*). Declarative knowledge is the type of knowledge that Krashen refers to when he defines *learning* and the type of knowledge that he claims is not able to be *acquired* as automatized *procedural knowledge* and the type of knowledge that is processed during the controlled phase of McLaughlin's model. As for the question whether declarative knowledge can be converted into procedural knowledge, Anderson (1993) suggests that it can be through stages: the cognitive stage, the associative stage, and the autonomous stage.

The third information processing theorist we wish to refer to is Pieneman (1989) whose processability and teachability theories address one of the potential constraints in the progress that learners can make as they move from the controlled processing of declarative knowledge to the automatized production of procedural knowledge. With regard to the role of written CF in this process, Pienemann, like McLaughlin and Anderson, is less explicit about the specific contribution of CF to the process than he is about the role of instruction. However, it is not difficult to make a connection to what he says about the learning and teaching of linguistic forms/structures and a role for CF within his processing claims and teaching possibilities. In his teachability hypothesis, Pienemann (1987, 1989, 1998) explains that grammar instruction can only be effective if it is provided when the learner is at a stage in his/her *inter-language* that is close to the point when it could be acquired naturally. He adds that an L2 learner cannot progress if one stage is missing and that teaching can be constrained by the stage a learner is at.

Up to this point, our focus has been on cognitive, information processing perspectives and their focus on the learner primarily as an autonomous individual than as a social being, situated in a socially influential environment. From this point on, we explore other theoretical perspectives relevant to the role of error and its treatment in SLA, namely those that view language learning/acquisition in more social terms. First, we will consider those who see the social perspective interacting with the cognitive perspective—*the interactionists*.

1.4 The Interactionist Perspective

Although the interactionists have mainly focused on oral interaction between learners and interlocutors, implications of interaction research are also applicable to issues related to error treatment. Early interactionists identified negotiation of meaning between L2 learners and their interlocutors, as they interactionally modified their utterances to achieve mutual understanding when communication breakdowns occurred, as an important component of the learning/acquisition process. Long's reformulation of the Interaction Hypothesis (as cited in Mitchell& Myles, 2004) places a greater emphasis on linking features of input and the linguistic environment (i.e., the social dimension) with learner-internal factors (the cognitive dimension) (Bitchener& Ferris, 2012). The interactionist perspective proposes a role for negative evidence (corrective feedback) in the SLA process. Several mediating factors may have an impact upon the extent to

which oral negative evidence can facilitate L2 development: the processing capacity of a learner; the degree of attention he/she gives to noticing, understanding, and awareness.

1.5. The Socio- Cultural Perspective

Socio-cultural theory of human mental processing, based on the works of Vygotsky, provides a very different perspective on the role of interaction in SLA. It assumes that all cognitive development, including language development, occurs as a result of social interactions between individuals, especially when learners have opportunities to collaborate and interact with speakers of the target language who are more knowledgeable than they are (e.g., teachers and more advanced learners). L2 learners can achieve higher levels of linguistic knowledge when they receive appropriate scaffolding (i.e., the process of support that involves a shift from collaborative inter-mental activity to autonomous intra-mental activity). Thus, it is claimed that learners, with the assistance of *other regulation* (e.g., provided by teachers and more advanced learners) can eventually be *self-regulated* (i.e., able to use the L2 autonomously). In particular, it is believed to be most effective in the learner's *Zone of Proximal Development(ZPD)* (i.e., the domain or skill where the learner is not yet capable of using the L2 autonomously as procedural knowledge but were, with the scaffolded assistance of the more proficient partner). Another component of socio-cultural theory that has relevance to both oral and written CF is *Activity Theory* (Lantolf&Appel, 1994;Leontiev, 1981). This theory sees all human actions, including mediated action, as configurations of both social and individual influences within a dynamic system—a system that must be investigated holistically rather than as discrete parts. It also focuses on the individual goals that learners have when undertaking a particular task or problem.

II.   PERSPECTIVES ON ERROR IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

2.1 Error as Character Flaw

"Good writing is characterized by grammatical purity, which can be defined as the absence of blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old" (Hill as quoted in Bitchner& Ferris, 2012, p. 29). In these early decades of college composition, there apparently was no concern over excessive attention to error at the expense of broader rhetorical issues, nor about the changing nature of language or subjective definitions of what constituted an *error*. Rather, attention focused on the appalling lapses of student writers and the urgent but regrettable need to teach "those so-called student writers their mother tongue".

Because good writing was blemish-free and because many student writers of that era (as in our era) failed to meet that standard, instructors, thus, were expected to assume "the task of disciplining student writers" (Santa, 2006) by providing extensive, comprehensive correction of student themes on an almost daily basis. Santa describes this as "clearly . . . an attempt . . . to mend the 'slovenly' English (and by inference—character) of college writers" (p. 20). Baldwin, quoted in Bitchener and Ferris (2012), describes freshman student as technically as a slovenly and careless writer. The point here is that, as late as 1960, "error as character flaw" was a powerful paradigm that influenced teachers' attitudes, their instruction, and their response practices.

2.2. Error as Developmental Stage

Santa (2006) notes that "Prior to the 1960s, error was an aberration, an embarrassment, a sign of illiteracy, sloth, disrespect, a signal of membership in the underclass" (p. 60). In contrast, drawing on the work of socio-linguists as well as psycholinguistic studies of first and second language acquisition and literacy development, Shaughnessy (1977)maintains that written errors made by basic writers are not, in fact, signs of carelessness, incompetence, or intellectual defectiveness, but rather rule-governed, dialect variations, and/or signposts of developmental stages that inexperienced writers and language learners experience as they acquire language and literacy in academic English. At the same time, because errors distract readers (or "carry messages which writers can't afford to send" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 12), and thus can stigmatize writers, teachers must thoughtfully address error and help under-prepared students to develop academic language and literacy skills. Because she simultaneously calls for a broader, more informed perspective on why students make errors and a more effective strategy for helping students develop their language and writing skills, Shaughnessy's study of basic writing has inspired several different lines of research and scholarly inquiry in the decades that followed it. In short, Shaughnessy's work has helped composition scholars and teachersespecially those who focus their efforts on under-prepared, basic, or second language writerslook more deeply for explanations or sources of written error and use their enlightened knowledge to better prepare students for the expectations of a sometimes-harsh audience outside of the English composition class (Bitchener& Ferris, 2012).

2.3 Error as Social Construct

Santa (2006) claims that "error is a *constructed* artifact" which "does not exist outside of agreed conventions of language, but rather in subjective criteria that readers bring to a text" (p. 10). Williams (1981) has

made a compelling argument that the idea of "error" resides primarily in the reader's mind rather than in the writer's incompetence—that readers, in a sense, "create" error by expecting it and noticing it, especially in student writing where teachers feel responsible for finding and eradicating it. As a dramatic illustration of his thesis, at the conclusion of the essay, Williams disclosed that he had deliberately placed over 100 common errors of grammar and usage ("errors" according to a popular composition handbook of the day) in his scholarly article. The point, of course, is that readers most likely did not notice many (or any) of the errors before their attention was called to them because they would not expect to find such errors in an essay by an accomplished writer in a respected journal. Williams' conclusion, in turn, leads to two related questions: (1) Do we only notice errors in student writing because we are looking for them, not because they are truly distracting or interfere with meaning? (2) If the "same" errors can be completely overlooked in a different context, how important are they, anyway? Tying the views of social constructionists and critical theorists together, if "error" is a figment of the teacher-reader's imagination (or a function of his/her expectations) rather than a real problem, should practitioners perpetuate the myth by emphasizing error in their classrooms and their feedback, or should they (and their students) ignore or resist these irrelevant and even oppressive concerns? (Bitchener& Ferris, 2012) However, scholars from many different camps have cautioned that ignoring the effects of error on real-world readers may be negligent and even harmful to student writers.

2.4 Current Views on Error

In Santa's recent historical overview (2006) of error in composition, he notes repeatedly that there is a clear discrepancy between what many composition theorists think about error and ongoing classroom practice: "Error has largely evaded successful theorizing . . . our response to error frequently deviates from what our own best thoughts on the matter dictate in response" (p. 131). Anson (2000) notes that "many teachers continue to feel torn between denying attention to error in their response because of its incompatibility with newer theoretical perspectives, and experiencing the unavoidable effects of error as they read their students' writing"(p. 6). For decades theorists have argued that: (a) obsessive attention to error in teacher response, is fruitless and counterproductive , (b) *error* is a socially constructed notion, anyway: what is considered an *error* in composition handbooks or by composition teachers might be perfectly acceptable in other contexts (or not even noticed, as Williams, 1981 has demonstrated), and (c) training students to avoid error (as advocated by

Shaughnessy, 1977) inappropriately maintains a questionable status quo that teachers and students should be challenging, not accommodating (Bitchener& Ferris, 2012).Nonetheless, teachers continue to pay a great deal of attention to error in their response to student writing and in their classroom instruction. This is a theory/practice divide that clearly baffles and frustrates composition scholars interested in error and larger questions of response.

III.   CONCLUSION

This paper was meant to provide a review on various perspectives about error and written corrective feedback in second language acquisition and composition studies. In SLA research, the focus was on the major theories including *The Behaviorist Perspective, Krashen's Theory, The Cognitive Perspective* (including three main models), *The Interactionist Perspective*, and *the Socio-Cultural Perspective*. As for composition studies research, they viewed error as character flaw, developmental stage and social construct. These views and perspectives can be of great benefit to practitioners and researchers. They can have various practical implications for language teaching and learning in particular.

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