



Feedback in Second Language Writing: An Introduction

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1. INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this volume came from the Symposium of Second Language Writing which was held in May 2010 in Murcia. It was clear from the proposals received for that forum that many presenters were interested in examining the area of feedback in second language writing from different angles. Moreover, in the last 3 years, over 85% of the manuscripts received by the *Journal of Second Language Writing* have dealt with the topic of feedback in writing, whether by teachers, supervisors, computers or classmates. Therefore, as conveners of a colloquium on the topic of feedback, we proposed putting together a special volume of the IJES on Feedback in Second Language Writing.

On the eve of the SSLW inauguration, a heated discussion broke out over the dinner table about the provision of feedback. Researchers, some of whom were also writing teachers, and who acted differently as far as written corrective feedback (WCF henceforth) was concerned, vehemently disagreed with one another as to the best way to help their own students. What is it about this area that evokes such strong reactions from normally cool academics?

Feedback in writing -and more specifically error correction, or WCF- is a crossroads at which many different interests converge: "The study of oral and written CF constitutes an area where theory and practice interface" (Ellis, 2010, p. 336). Moreover, it is an area that directly concerns teachers-often rather reluctant to accept research findings-as much as researchers. The interests of second language writing researchers overlap at this point with those of second language acquisition scholars. PhD supervisors are as interested in its effects as primary school teachers are. Teachers and researchers in Europe and Asia as well as in

America and Australia struggle to elucidate the factors that influence corrective feedback and the relationship between this feedback and learning to write. Large numbers of erudite articles have been devoted to considering the topic from many different angles: the sources of feedback, the medium used, the effects of differences in L2 proficiency, the influence of prior experiences, the differential effects of varying the type of feedback provided and the specific object of feedback, whether language, organization or rhetoric and content.

The present volume is a further attempt to contribute to the research in the field and to do so from different perspectives. On the one hand, one of the aims of the monograph is to critically reflect on what we can learn from the available research on error correction, as well as to find out ways of moving forward in theory, research and pedagogy. This is what **Catherine van Beuningen** and **Neomy Storch** have attempted in their respective contributions. A second aim of this publication is to make visible a number of insights from empirical studies carried out in a variety of contexts, which either focus on only partially explored areas or are intended as attempts to answer the still open questions in the field. Thus, **John Bitchener**, **Helen Basturkmen** and **Martin East** explore supervisor feedback as an integral part of thesis and dissertation writing; **Khaled El Ebyary** and **Scott Windeatt** analyze the impact of computer-based feedback on L2 writing; **Norman Evans**, **K. James Hartshorn** and **Emily Allen Tuioti** delve into the issue of how teachers perceive their use of corrective feedback; **JingJing Ma** looks at peer response processes as well as some factors bearing on them; and **Noelia Martínez Esteban** and **Julio Roca de Larios** investigate the use of model texts as a feedback technique in individual and collaborative writing.

2. THE RESEARCH REVIEWS IN THE VOLUME

Given the cumulative nature of scientific research, taking stock of what has been done in any line of inquiry is a necessary precondition for researchers to know about what remains to be done (Norris & Ortega, 2006). In this respect, substantial accounts have been undertaken within the L2 written feedback literature which, to a greater or lesser extent, have adopted a critical stance towards the research designs of the studies reviewed (e.g., Ferris, 2004, 2010; Guenette, 2007). Ferris (2004), for example, attempted to take stock of the research on error correction (EC) by examining the studies reviewed by Truscott in 1999 plus the new studies which had appeared since then. Two of her main conclusions were that the research base up to that date was inadequate (since very few studies had compared “correction” versus “no correction” conditions), and that most studies were incomparable in terms of their design parameters. Adopting a similarly critical position, Guénette (2007) concluded that the inconsistency of results reported in EC studies up to 2003, “rather than evidence that feedback does not work” (p. 41), could be attributed to research design and methodological flaws as well as to the influence of variables other than those included in the designs of the different

studies. Ferris (2010), in turn, has recently looked at the differences in contexts of study, research designs, error types and feedback provision involved in SLA and L2 writing scholarship on WCF to propound a possible explanation for the conflicting methodologies and conclusions reported in the abovementioned reviews. According to this author, these differences in points of departure might help us understand, for example, why those studies which SLA-oriented researchers might interpret to be of limited value because they do not demonstrate how the effects of WCF extend to further compositions, might be viewed as valid by compositional researchers because they are assumed to develop learners' self-editing strategies.

The two reviews included in the present volume follow this critical tradition and suggest a number of avenues to be pursued in future research. Along the lines suggested by (Ferris, 2010), **van Beuningen** initially distinguishes between feedback studies within the L2 writing field and those in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA). She explicitly draws on the latter to discuss the theoretical underpinnings both in favour and against the use of CF in L2 writing. Regarding the former, the author focuses her attention on the insufficiency of meaning-based L2 language production *per se* to allow learners to go beyond strategic and semantic processing and, consequently, on the need to focus learners' attention on linguistic form within communicative contexts as a way to secure transfer-appropriate learning and the noticing of mismatches between the target language and their interlanguage system. WCF, as a reactive, individualized and off-line focus-on-form teaching strategy, seems especially suited to helping learners to activate those processes. The arguments against EC discussed by the author basically follow Truscott's (1996) theoretical objections and pertain to the value of explicit knowledge and the issue of learners' developmental readiness for feedback to be effective. The author then presents the main controversial issues addressed by advocates of CF and critically discusses the empirical findings of early and recent research regarding those issues, i.e., the potential of CF for promoting accuracy improvement, the effectiveness of different correction methodologies, the amenability of different error types to CF, and the possible detrimental effects of error correction. Finally, a number of suggestions for future research are presented including, among others, the exploration of the potential for learning of unfocused feedback, the qualitative analysis of individuals' sequential accuracy performance as an alternative to the crude picture represented by global accuracy measures, or the need to measure the effects of CF in realistic contexts where learners focus on meaning while writing.

The focus of **Storch's** article, driven by her unease at the way the field is dealing with research on written corrective feedback, is recent research on WCF. A brief, informed and rigorous review of prior studies (mid 1980s to 2003), along the lines of the two reviews discussed above (Ferris, 2004; Guénette, 2007), and a comparison between those and recent studies (2005 onwards) allows the author to acknowledge improvements in research design, comparability parameters and consistency of findings in accuracy development. However, it also allows her to pinpoint a number of limitations regarding the limited range of structures

treated, the short-lived nature of most treatments and the paucity of attention paid to learners' attitudes, motivation and goals in processing the feedback provided to them. **Storch** finally comes to the conclusion that the field has failed to produce more knowledge because it has, paradoxically, moved away from ecological studies based in real ongoing classroom situations and towards experimental designs, which cannot provide us with the answers we need. Accordingly, she suggests that more qualitative and longitudinal approaches to research on WCF are needed which view learners as active agents of their own response to feedback in the context of real educational programs.

3. THE EMPIRICAL STUDIES IN THE VOLUME

Apart from being of theoretical and pedagogical interest, corrective feedback has flourished in recent years because, as Ellis (2010) has pointed out, it is also eminently researchable. However, in order to avoid the pitfalls that befell similar "popular" areas of applied linguistic research in the past (e.g. concerns about their lack of theoretical underpinnings or misgivings about the methods or instruments employed leading to a mistrust of their findings and a consequent decline in scholarly interest), Ellis puts forward a framework covering the variables involved in oral and written corrective feedback that can serve as a heuristic to examine previous studies and suggest possible directions for future research. In order to examine the empirical studies on written feedback in the present volume, we propose to use this framework – which includes contextual factors, individual difference factors (covering both learner and teacher variables), the types of feedback used and learning outcomes – although, for our purposes, we add a further element: the methodological procedures employed in the studies.

3.1. Context

In Ellis's (2010) framework for research on corrective feedback, context is seen as interacting with learner internal factors. Context may be considered first in the broadest sense as the macro setting where writing instruction takes place, with a broad distinction generally being drawn between immersion, foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) writing contexts. Most of the empirical studies in the present volume are set in FL contexts. However, Ortega (2009) recently warned against being blinded by the "FL label" to the broad range of diverse contextual factors that the label may conceal and reminds us that "research is always built on contingent, context-specific data" (p. 250). Ortega also reported on the expansion of publications on FL writing over the last 15 years and suggested that "in the not-so-distant future" those academics doing research in EFL contexts might be able to pool the knowledge they generate in order to further the field of SLW: "Preferably, such knowledge about EFL

writing should be generated from a wide range of school, university, workplace and virtual settings across diverse geographical and institutional contexts” (2009, p.251).

The empirical studies in the present volume certainly fulfil those criteria in various ways. Firstly, they represent geographical contexts ranging over the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and Oceania since they are set in Egypt (**El Ebyary & Windeatt**), China (**Ma**), Spain (**Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**) and New Zealand (**Bitchener, Basturkmen and East**). Though the study by **Evans, Hartshorn and Allen Tuioti** is not situated in any particular context, 63% of their responses came from the USA while 37% came from outside. In fact, if we take into account all the participants, these teachers were reporting on experience on feedback built up in 69 different countries. Secondly, although most of the feedback researched in this empirical section was offered and received in university contexts, this took place in different settings including classes for undergraduates (**Ma**), teacher trainees (**El-Ebyary and Windeatt**) and postgraduate education (**Bitchener, Basturkmen and East**), the exception to this being the study by **Martínez Esteban and Roca de Larios**, which focused on secondary school pupils in an EFL class. The volume does not, however, include workplace or virtual settings.

A further distinction can be made between two contexts of writing pedagogy (e.g. Manchón, In press): one where writing skills are fostered (Learning-to-Write contexts) and one where writing is used merely as a vehicle to teach language (Writing-to-Learn-Language contexts). Three out of the four contextualised empirical studies in this volume centre on settings where students are supported in their text production with the apparent overarching goal of learning to write texts in English. In **Bitchener, Basturkmen and East**'s study the supervisor's goal is clearly to help the student become a member of an academic community and become proficient in a particular academic genre through explanation, practice and feedback in a one-to-one situation within the broad context of postgraduate study, in this case in the areas of Humanities, Science/Maths and Commerce. This differs markedly from the other studies, also set in contexts where the focus is ostensibly on learning how to write but where the final goal may be less evident, as in **Ma**'s research, where non-English majors were learning to write expository texts in English. Similarly, the writing course for the trainee English teachers studied by **El-Ebyary and Windeatt** was intended to help them learn to write a range of genres, such as resumés, cover letters and essays. The first two presumably have practical applications outside university life, but the third genre, essays, is purely academic. Only the research by **Martínez Esteban and Roca de Larios** is clearly defined as taking place in a Writing-to-Learn-English context within regular EFL classes. Thus, rather than being classified in one category or another, these studies seem to be situated on a cline between a Learning-to-Write function (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East**.) at one extreme and a Writing-to-Learn-Language function (**Martínez & Roca**) at the other extreme, the other two studies falling somewhere in between.

3.2 Methodological procedures

Variations in the methodology and purpose of the empirical studies included in the present volume impinge directly on the interpretation of their results. Although a deep analysis of the different methodological procedures used is beyond the scope of this introduction, the following considerations should be borne in mind when reading the studies that follow.

First, different approaches have been adopted to set up the studies and collect the data under investigation. Two studies (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East** and **Ma**) have followed a qualitative approach and used different sources of data to explore feedback practices in different educational settings. **Ma's** study is an attempt to explore the decision-making processes involved in the on-line provision of peer feedback with the use of think-aloud and stimulated recall protocols, interviews, document analysis and classroom observation. **Bitchener, Basturkmen and East** have also used a multi-method approach to data collection to analyze the way thesis supervisors use feedback to help students accommodate their writing practices to the new genre requirements. A casual-comparative approach has been adopted by the two interventionist studies (**El Ebyary & Windeatt** and **Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**) which have looked at the effects of different forms of feedback on students' writing. **El Ebyary & Windeatt** examine the impact of computer-based feedback on students' immediate revisions and on the quality of their subsequent texts, while **Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios** focus on how the use of models as a feedback technique impact on the noticing and revision processes of students working as individuals or collaboratively as pairs. Finally, one study has attempted to describe teachers' attitudes and approaches to feedback through the use of a electronic survey. **Evans, Hartshorn & Allen Tuioti** asked a large number of teachers around the world about their written correction practices and their views and principles related to written corrective feedback.

Second, data in the different studies have been collected by means of a variety of techniques which include (i) direct observation (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, El Ebyary & Windeatt**), analysis of written texts, documents or samples (**Evans, Hartshorn & Allen Tuioti, El Ebyary & Windeatt, Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**) or computer-based analysis (**El Ebyary & Windeatt**); and (ii) retrospection techniques, ranging from those applied on-line, i.e., think-aloud (**Ma**) or note-taking (**Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**), to others used immediately after the event via stimulated recall (**Ma**) or more delayed in time, in the form of questionnaires (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East; El Ebyary & Windeatt; Evans, Hartshorn & Allen Tuioti**) or interviews (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East; Ma; El Ebyary & Windeatt**). The first set of techniques, although minimally disruptive of the composition process and quite informative in many respects, are not useful to capture the covert processes of writers at work. Retrospection, in contrast, is supposed to provide more information of what goes on in the mind when tackling a task, although some doubts have been raised about the possible reactivity effects of on-line techniques (see Smagorinsky, 1994,

for a review) or about the risk of showing “the way participants situate themselves vis-à-vis a particular question or the person asking it” (Block, 2000: 760) in the case of immediate or delayed introspection.

Third, an important issue in writing research is whether brief time-compressed tasks or written compositions collected during a period of time should be used as representative of students’ writing (Hamp-Lyons, 1990; Henry, 1996; Raimes, 1998). The studies in the present volume have used these two types of sampling, as well as different genres and levels of cognitive complexity. The time-compressed tasks used include a picture-based narration (**Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**) and expository essays (**Ma**), the former being less cognitively complex in terms of conceptualization and linguistic encoding demands than the latter. Students in **El Ebyary & Windeatt’s** study, in turn, have been asked to write four compositions at home (supposedly resúms, cover letters and essays) in the course of eight weeks without any restrictions, while those in **Bitchener, Basturkmen and East’s** are involved in a qualitatively different type of task, which demands their engagement in new forms of literacy and specific genre requirements. From a purely cognitive perspective and assuming that complex concepts require the use of complex syntactic structures (see e.g. Robinson, 2001), we can thus conclude that there is a gradation in terms of complexity or difficulty in the tasks used by the different authors: from the less demanding picture-based narrative (**Martínez Esteban & Roca**) to the far more complex demands involved in thesis writing (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East**), the text types used by **Ma** and **El Ebyary and Windeatt** falling somewhere in the middle. As for task completion, the study by **Martínez Esteban and Roca de Larios** is the only one in the collection where a comparison between individual and collaborative writing and feedback engagement is attempted through a three-stage task.

3.3 Feedback providers

Apart from differences in contexts, another source of variation in feedback studies lies in the teachers themselves and their attitudes to feedback. In Ellis’s (2010) framework these form part of the individual factors, which cover both learners and teachers, or rather “feedback givers and receivers” (since other people--and indeed software [see below]--can also provide feedback). This area has generally been under-researched (Ellis, 2010) although Lee (e.g. 2003) has explored teacher preferences and strategies in feedback.

It has normally been assumed that teachers are in favour of correcting learner errors (and, indeed, **Evans, Hartshorn & Allen Tuioti** in this volume provide hard evidence to support that assumption) but the heated debate among professionals tends to revolve around what errors need to be corrected as well as who should correct them, when and how (Ellis, 2010). The thirty five supervisors in **Bitchener, Basturkmen and East’s** study were academics from three discipline areas (Humanities, Maths/Science, and Commerce) who,

though generally untrained in matters of feedback, were nevertheless experienced with students from both L1 and L2 backgrounds. However, even among this group of experienced academics differences in attitudes towards feedback could be discerned. For example, while most considered feedback on content to be the most important element in their task, several Humanities supervisors seemed to feel that –whether dealing with L1 or L2 learners--content feedback would not be so necessary if there were more communication between supervisors and students and more discussion of content at the outset. This reveals different attitudes and approaches among these academics, some favouring advance preparation and thus problem avoidance, with others seeming to believe it was better to allow the students to develop their own content and preferring to step in later with feedback to reorient the text. Moreover, these differences also extended to the area of linguistic accuracy since some supervisors believed that helping students to identify and notice their errors formed an important part of their role as supervisors, whereas others provided feedback while not really agreeing with this role.

As pointed out above, we would be wrong to limit our consideration of individual factors to teachers alone since they are not the only sources of “other-prompted revision” (Ortega, 2009 p. 239): classmates may also play a role in the feedback process, this being particularly useful in EFL contexts where large classes may be the norm. Ortega (2009) points out that “training for peer response has come to be viewed in recent years as an essential need in EFL contexts, and a feasible practice that can lead to successful peer response among writers who share the same L1” (p. 239). In the present volume, **Ma’s** two Chinese peer reviewers provide us with rich insights into the complex roots of perceptions underlying the behaviour of students giving feedback to classmates, insights that can -in the long term- feed into better training for peer reviewers. However, the foundations of their behaviour during peer review lay in contrasting attitudes towards expository writing, which arose from differences in their prior experiences of writing, testing or language learning in general and in their out-of-school activities. If the process of peer review involves the construction of a mental representation of the other writer’s text and its comparison with some ideal standard or benchmark text in the reviewer’s mind, then this study helps us to understand how that mental benchmark is constructed and, therefore, to appreciate the effect of individual differences on it.

3.4 Forms of feedback

The main element in Ellis’s (2010) framework is written feedback itself, which can be considered from various angles. One dimension of the provision of feedback deals with its general object or focus. Most recent studies – particularly those with a SLA slant (Ferris, 2010) – have looked at WCF, i.e. feedback on language forms with a view to advancing the language learning of the writer and thus contributing to text quality. But feedback on second language writing can obviously also focus on content and on rhetoric or organisation. In the

different empirical contributions to this volume an array of different types of feedback can be found.

Three studies in the present volume consider feedback at all three levels of the writing process. In **Ma's** work, it is the peer reviewers who provide the feedback under consideration. In that study the rubric provided for the peer reviewers by their teacher drew their attention to matters of content, organization and language when evaluating the text; thus, the three levels were supposedly in focus. However, depending on the priorities of each reviewer and the task, their attention was devoted to different concerns. As the priority of Hyshan was correct grammar and vocabulary, she attended primarily to these in both the texts she was evaluating but gave comparatively more attention to content matters in the illustration essay task than in the cause and effect one, thus revealing a task effect on her behaviour. In contrast, the general orientation of the other reviewer, Fiona, was to matters of organisation and content to which she consistently assigned priority across both tasks. But both reviewers attended to all three levels in their classmates' texts. Probably owing to the nature of the texts (postgraduate dissertations) in **Bitchener, Basturkmen and East's** study, too, the supervisors' attention was distributed across all three writing levels: content, organization and language. 32 out of a total of 35 supervisors gave feedback on content; 31 gave it on the rhetorical structure or organisation of the texts, while 33 provided it on language matters. The *Criterion* software used in **El Ebyary and Windeatt's** study also provided feedback on content, organisation, style, grammar and mechanics in the foreign language texts produced by their Egyptian learners as well as producing a holistic score for the essays. Thus, students who might have only received feedback on a single text once a year from their class teacher had the benefit of several sessions of feedback at different levels and on different drafts from the computer program. Apart from the 8% of teachers in **Evans, Hartshorn and Allen Tuioti's** study who claimed that they gave no feedback on language concerns because "content, rhetoric and organization matter most", all the others seemed to give feedback on language as well as on content and organisation.

The exception to this general use of feedback for language, organisation and content lies in the study of secondary pupils by **Martínez Esteban and Roca de Larios**, which tended to focus on language concerns alone, perhaps because of the students' lower level of English as well as the SLA orientation of the study. This focus tends to be more typical in the field of second language writing as a whole where most feedback studies centre on written corrective feedback (WCF). Ellis (2009) offers a typology of the methodological options teachers have when offering language feedback to their students consisting of six basic categories from which they can select the appropriate type for their particular pedagogical context. In this typology a distinction is made between *Direct CF*, in which the correct language form is explicitly provided to the writer, from *Indirect CF*, where the error is indicated but the correct form is withheld so that the writer is obliged to process the error in order to correct it.

Another dimension in feedback type is the narrow or broad focus of the feedback, a distinction being drawn in this case between *Focused feedback*, where the teacher concentrates on a very small number of specific “narrowly drawn, and carefully defined features” (Ferris, 2010, p.192), e.g. articles, and *Unfocused feedback*, in which the range of errors covered is much broader, to such a point that teachers may even attempt to correct all of them. Recent research undertaken from an SLA standpoint, has tended to concentrate on focused feedback, as **Storch** and **van Beuningen** discuss in greater detail in the present volume, and has suggested that when feedback is narrowed down in this way for research purposes, measurable positive effects can be observed (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008) both in the short term and in the longer term. However, Ferris (2010) points out that this may be a problem from the writing teacher’s point of view since focused feedback “will not address students’ accuracy issues comprehensively enough because student writers tend to make a broad range of written errors” (p. 192). She raises the question of whether a middle ground can be found between these two types: “focused error treatment would still be provided but in ways that are more representative of the diversity and complexity of language issues in L2 student writing” (p. 192). In this volume the empirical studies (**Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, El Ebyary & Windeatt, Ma, Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**) all deal with unfocused feedback.

Within Ellis’s (2009) typology of feedback types, the example given of *Electronic feedback* involves teachers providing a hyperlink to a concordance file where student writers can find examples of the problem structure. However, with the array of software available nowadays, other possibilities for feedback involving electronic media clearly exist. These range from hyperlinks provided by the teacher to “software-generated feedback to replace or enhance direct human feedback” (Ware & Warschauer, 2006 p.106) or even broader conceptions of feedback including email collaboration, online chat and multimedia authoring. One example of software-generated feedback is furnished in this volume by *Criterion*, the programme used in the study by **El Ebyary and Windeatt**, which provides automated essay evaluation on content and organisation as well as grammar errors and the more mechanical features of essay production, thereby helping to alleviate the onus of large classes on EFL teachers, who may, as a result of using this software, be able to motivate students to write without having to hand-score a mass of scripts later.

The final category in Ellis’s (2009) typology is *Reformulation*, a type used by SLA-oriented writing researchers (e.g. Sachs and Polio, 2007), in which the writer’s text is rewritten by a native speaker with a view to maintaining the original message while changing the written expression to bring it more in line with native-like production. This form of indirect feedback does not lend itself to use in large classes in EFL contexts, though, where it is difficult to imagine teachers having enough time to be able to rewrite their students’ texts and where native speakers might not be readily available to do this task. The form of indirect feedback chosen for **Martínez Esteban and Roca de Larios’s** study, therefore, was

modelling. In this mode, after looking at the picture cues for a narrative task and expressing their language problems (using prompts) the adolescent learners produced their written stories. Later, two model texts were presented and then removed before the learners finally had to rewrite their narrative. It was assumed that this sequence would lead to the learners' noticing "the holes" in their linguistic knowledge and therefore paying attention to the forms in the model that they needed. In a similar way to Reformulation, then, in Modelling the learners have to compare the "ideal" version with their own version, notice any language—or possibly ideational and organisational—discrepancies and thereby try to close the gap between their current level of ability and their zone of proximal development. This is the most indirect and least explicit form of feedback since there is no correction of the students' own production and errors are not flagged; the learners have to strive to discover the implicit "message" concealed in the reformulated text. This has certain parallelisms—albeit at a much higher level of complexity and in the area of rhetoric rather than language—with the supervisors in **Bitchener, Basturkmen and East's** study recommending that their postgraduate students read other (specified) dissertations that model a particular form of organisation.

3.5. Learning outcomes

When it comes to the analysis of the learning outcomes reported in the different studies, a preliminary question to discern is how "learning" is understood, especially if we take into account that the relationship between noticing or focus on form processes, on the one hand, and language learning, on the other, is a "somewhat problematic equation" (Manchón, In press). In this respect, Ellis (2006) has argued that L2 learning may alternatively be understood as the acquisition of a completely new linguistic feature, the improvement in accuracy of partially acquired features, or the gradual progression through a number of stages in the acquisition of specific features, and suggested that studies on written correction have overwhelmingly used accuracy as the measure of the outcome of exposure to feedback (Ellis, 2010). Along similar lines and following Norris & Ortega (2003), Sachs & Polio (2007) distinguish between short-term changes in linguistic accuracy and long-term developmental changes as the two ends of a continuum interspersed with non-linear processes of detection, noticing and restructuring of linguistic forms which may occur with or without learners' awareness. These assumptions may allow us to interpret how learning outcomes have been reported in the only two empirical studies included in the volume dealing with the effects of feedback on students' writing (**El Ebyary & Windeatt** and **Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios**). **El Ebyary & Windeatt** report that, as the number of errors in the second drafts of the four essays were generally lower than those detected in the first drafts, computer-based feedback (CBF) allowed their participants to notice and reflect in some detail on the errors identified by the electronic programme. However, given that some students were found to rely

on the omission of some of the errors previously identified rather than on their correction in subsequent drafts, the authors speculate that the improvement “may not have represented learning, or it may indicate an awareness of what they were doing wrong, but not necessarily an understanding of why, or of how they could correct some of their mistakes” (p. 19). **Martinez & Roca de Larios**, in turn, found that initial output production not only resulted in the immediate or proactive recognition of linguistic problems (holes) but also enabled the further noticing of gaps in the subsequent processing of the models provided as feedback. These gaps, which mainly came in the form of ideas and expressions learners had not suspected in the previous writing-only stage, were reasonably incorporated into subsequent revisions three days later. The authors interpret this finding as an indication that, although the learners probably noticed these gaps at the level of detection rather than understanding (Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 2001; Tomlin & Villa, 1994), some rehearsal to retain the new language strings must have occurred during the comparison stage, especially among learners working in collaboration. Both studies then, despite their use of different time spans, focus their attention on the initial stages of learning, i.e., noticing and short-term incorporation into their own production by the learners of (part of) the feedback provided (Reinders, 2009), and therefore suggest the need for further research on writers’ engagement with feedback for longer periods of time, in different contexts and with students at different proficiency levels.

3.6. Individual learner factors

Individual learner factors include, among others, age, language aptitude, memory, learning style, motivation or beliefs which, together with contextual factors, are taken to mediate the way learners engage with feedback and ultimately learn from it (Ellis, 2010). The study of learner factors has not been an area of major concern in the written feedback field but a great deal of individual variation has been attested in the way students respond to teacher commentaries (Ferris, 2006; Ferris and Hedgecock, 1998). Also, a number of factors have been found to play a role in this variation, namely, students’ feelings about the validity of teacher feedback (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990), content knowledge (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999), receptivity or resistance to revision (Enginarlar, 1993), motivation (Goldstein, 2006), beliefs (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010) or, simply, the correspondence or lack thereof between the teacher’s response and the students’ expectations (Hyland, 2003). Although the analysis of individual learner factors has not been explicitly addressed in any of the studies included in the present volume, there are a number of relevant observations pertaining to the way students respond to the feedback received (**Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios, El Ebyary & Windeatt**) or to the way they give feedback to their peers (**Ma**). **Martinez & Roca de Larios** found large standard deviations in the length of the texts produced by the individuals in their study after comparing their original texts with the models provided. This indicated that these learners differed substantially in the comparison they made between the

ideational orientation and linguistic level of their own texts and those of the models and, consequently, that the feedback provided was not equally effective for all the participants. **El Ebyary & Windeatt** similarly report that, although the computer-based feedback used in their study had an effect on students' revision of grammar, usage, mechanics and style errors, "the nature and size of this effect varied from trainee to trainee" (p. 14). Slight individual variation was also found in the use of the pre-writing tools available on-line, since most students did not use *Criterion* for planning purposes. From the perspective of peer feedback, **Ma's** study shows how the students' personal histories of previous learning and assessment of L2 writing at the high school, positive and negative experiences with high-stakes writing tests such as TOEFL and participation in extra-curricular L2 oral activities might have shaped their individual conceptions of what good English expository writing entails. These conceptions, which involved similarities and differences between both writers, were found to have a strong influence on the development of individual decision-making styles that predisposed them to pay attention to specific aspects of writing when evaluating the texts produced by their peers.

In line with the findings reported in these studies, scholars constantly remind us that "one size does not fit all" but rather that the teacher's provision of helpful feedback should be fine-tuned to the individual learner's intentions, knowledge, problems and wants to the greatest extent possible (Goldstein, 2004; Hyland, 2003). However, as mentioned above, individual variation is an area largely unexplored in written feedback research which should be addressed in future inquiry (Ferris, 2010).

4. CONCLUSION

We hope that both the reviews of prior studies (Part I) and the empirical studies (Part II) in this volume can contribute to the theory and practice of the teaching of second language writing. In her closing paper **Fiona Hyland** looks back over the different pieces of research and tries to pull out some common threads of interest for the field and then looks ahead to future lines of research that arise from the implications of the studies presented here. In particular, she makes a further plea for longitudinal, naturalistic research that will explore some of the issues more deeply from different theoretical positions (e.g. cognitive and socio-cultural angles). In the area of pedagogy, the suggestion is also made that teachers need to become familiar with the range of feedback types available and select from them, where possible, not only practices that are effective in that moment but also those practices that foster student autonomy in the long term (through, for example, self-regulation and self-evaluation) rather than creating dependence on a teacher. In these ways feedback will continue to serve both theoretical and pedagogical purposes and will continue to survive and flourish as a research area.

Acknowledgement

The co-editors of this special volume would like to thank both the individual authors who have taken part in this special issue of IJES and all those professionals in many different countries who gave so generously of their time and their expertise in evaluating and providing magnificent feedback to the contributors to this volume.

This special issue is part of a research project supported by a research grant from the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (Research Grant FFI2009-14155) entitled *Estrategias de Uso en la Adquisición Formal del Inglés como L2: Uso, Entrenamiento y Resultados de Aprendizaje*.

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