Universidad Veracruzana

Dirección General de la Unidad de Estudios de Posgrado
Área Académica de Humanidades

Centro de Idiomas – Orizaba

MAESTRÍA EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

Reporte del Proyecto Terminal de Aplicación Innovadora del Conocimiento

‘The Impact of Direct and Indirect Written Corrective Feedback Strategies on Classroom Writing Activities: the case of a group of MEIF students at the language Center in Orizaba’

Línea de Generación y Aplicación del Conocimiento: Procesos de Enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés en el Sistema Educativo Mexicano

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Veracruz, Ver., Septiembre de 2013
Acknowledgements

This paper would have been impossible without the support of some important people near me during this learning process.

First I would like to thank all the MEILE facilitators at the Language Center of the University of Veracruz in Orizaba for the knowledge they shared with me in a very humanistic way enlightening my own knowledge of the teaching-learning practice.

Special thanks to my supervisor M.A. Luis A. Santana Martinez, whose support and encouragement drove me to take this dignified endeavor to good ending.

I would also like to thank M.A. Janeth Tello Carrillo for having read this paper with professional eyes and for having given me very useful feedback and invaluable suggestions.

Above all, I am endlessly grateful to my whole family: My parents Victórico and Imelda for their never-ending love and priceless presence; all my brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews for their understanding and unconditional support at all times. All of them, despite many unfortunate events, have kept my faith firm and believing that in life there is a good reason and an appropriate time for everything.
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Abstract

After revising some theoretical considerations adjoining written corrective feedback (WCF) practice, I carried out research in a group of 12 basic-level students who study English as a foreign language at the University of Veracruz under a model called MEIF. Students under this program have shown difficulties such as lack of cohesion and coherence, mistaken use of grammar or vocabulary when writing short paragraphs. Although the benefits of WCF have been controversial for over two decades, I decided to implement two strategies in this practice to investigate 1) the reactions students have when receiving either direct or indirect written corrective feedback (DWCF / IWCF), and 2) the effect it has on the writing they produce in the classroom. I collected data using observational (written products) and non observational methods (questionnaires, checklists). The study found that when students are not used to getting WCF they find it difficult to work on the corrections indicated by their teacher, especially if it is indirect corrective feedback which requires them to analyze language. It was also found that by means of DWCF students get familiar with this practice, and as they progress in it, they find it easier to correct their writing by means of IWCF. Along the process, I found out that after using these two strategies, students are more aware of the language they are learning to use in a written form. After concluding this research I suggest WCF should be clearly defined and designed as a core part of the development of the writing skills in a daily basis.

Key words: Strategies, Feedback, Corrective feedback
Introduction

A great challenge in empowering the language learner is making students aware of the importance of developing the habit of writing more effectively and more accurately. Jo McDonough (1993) points out that people talk and listen more frequently than they write because the reason to write is not that frequent. Davies and Pearse (2000), seven years later, consider that writing is the least used. That is probably because, as Harmer (2004) says, “the ability to write has to be consciously learned.” and “training students to” do so “demands the care and attention of language teachers.”

Nowadays, in a globalized world, learners are required to write for academic and for professional reasons; and if they want to be successful, in these environments, the more precise and assertive their writing is, the more opportunities they would have to develop their careers. Mostly for professional reasons, learners face the need of learning a second language and sooner or later they will probably need to learn to write it effectively and accurately to face the oncoming academic and professional demands inherent to any profession in a new, globalized era. There are many ways to guide students through different stages in the process of writing. One of them is written corrective feedback (WCF). This paper focuses on direct and indirect written corrective strategies (DWCF and IWCF) and their impact on students’ writing skill.

There is a lot of controversy on the effectiveness of WCF for second language learners. On one hand there are the experts who say that written corrective feedback strategies have a positive effect on learners and that when written corrective feedback is given students show progress in their accuracy. On the other hand, there are the experts who say that there is little or no difference between the mistakes made by students who have received written corrective feedback and the mistakes made by students who have not. This paper intends to analyze what
impact direct and indirect written corrective strategies can have on the improvement of students’ writing at a basic level.

I teach English II at the University of Veracruz’ Language Center located in Orizaba. This course is mandatory for all students at the different faculties. Every course I receive students who arrive into the course with an elementary basic instruction of English, but who for some reason find it very difficult to write even simple informative sentences. Recently I got one of these groups with 12 students who have the same problem. I decided to investigate why after having taken a true beginner course, they could still not write simple sentences or short paragraphs accurately. I found out that formal or informal corrective feedback had not taken much place in their practice of English. And when it did, only some students worked on them. I investigated on written corrective feedback strategies and I decided to use direct and indirect written corrective feedback strategies to see if it was possible to help my students to notice their mistakes and work on correcting them to produce a more accurate piece of writing at their basic level.
Chapter I

Context & Focus

1.1 Context

The University of Veracruz has six Language Centers across the State. They are located in five regions: Xalapa, Cordoba-Orizaba, Poza Rica-Tuxpan, Veracruz and Coatzacoalcos-Minatitlán. These language centers offer classes to two main groups: the open public and to students from the different faculties in the University. The courses offered for the general public are nine terms and they go from Basic English 100 that corresponds to A1 in the Common European Framework (see appendix 1), to Advanced English 300 corresponding to B2 in the same framework. The Language Centers at the University of Veracruz provide English I and English II (corresponding to A1 in the framework mentioned above) under a program called MEIF (Flexible and Integral Education Method). According to Ricaño Escobar (2004), this method aims to form university students in an integral way, developing 4 educational dimensions: humanistic, intellectual, social, and professional with flexible class-hours that allow students to get involved in other learning experiences. This model calls for teachers and students to work collaboratively in a more significant teaching-learning process to construct knowledge not only to interact successfully inside the classroom, but far beyond it making it learning for life. As Rivas Espinosa states, one of the areas of this model is the General Basic Formative Area (AFBG). This is an area with subjects common to all fields of study and it is mandatory for them to pass these subjects during the first terms. English I and II are two subjects of this area and they require teachers to help their students develop the four basic language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. This project will focus on writing presenting some aspects of written corrective feedback and its impact on the students’ writing.

1.2 Teacher’s background

I have been a teacher of English at the language centers in Cordoba and Orizaba. I have taught basic level students for twenty three years. However, I have taught
English I and II under the MEIF model for only six years. I receive students who have different educational backgrounds. Some of them are somehow familiar with English language, but most of them arrive with little or no knowledge of what learning language is about. So I have to apply integrative activities to help them complement each other with what they know in order to work collaboratively along their learning stage. English I and II are mandatory courses at the University of Veracruz, and due to that fact I make myself responsible to integrate the group by means of appropriate activities in order to develop and finish the course successfully, otherwise my learners' permanence at their field of study would be at risk. This semester I am giving English II to a group of 12 students who have taken English I, and who at some extent can manage basic notions of English.

1.3 Students’ background

For this project I worked with a group of seven female and five male students. They come from public schools and they report that their instruction on English was very limited. Some of them report that they never had a class. Some others said it was either very simple with their teachers speaking to them in Spanish and the class consisting in transferring information from their books into their notebooks or very difficult where their teachers spoke to them in English using high register therefore making it very difficult for students to understand the class. Very few of them reported having teachers who cared about their learning using appropriate strategies for them to learn.

Consequently, the instruction which is more consistent to all of them is the one they received in English I. However, a single course is not enough to help students develop the four basic language skills. I decided to work on written corrective feedback strategies because I asked them to write a paragraph about their personal information and about their families; and when we checked it together I realized that they can more or less express their ideas, but they do it with a lot of grammar
mistakes. I talked to them and they agreed they would like to improve their writing at least at this basic level.

1.4 Problem/focus

The main issues embedded in my research problem are the lack of accuracy some students show while producing a text in a second language, and the strategies to be developed to help my learners overcome this problem. I am aware that developing writing strategies is a very complex enterprise, but giving written corrective feedback on the students’ written products is a way to start making them aware of the importance of this basic language skill.

Along these six years of experience with MEIF groups, I have realized that my students, in general, lack the ability to produce accurate or semi-accurate pieces of writing. On one hand, they focus more on the information they want to express than on the precision of the language they use to do so. They do not pay attention to the elements of writing such as grammar, parts of speech, well structured sentences, word order, and punctuation among others. For example, they tend not to use pronouns to refer to subjects; they only use commas to separate ideas and not periods or other punctuation marks; they do not use upper or lower case letter appropriately; many times there is not concordance between the subject and the verb form; they do not conjugate verbs appropriately, they think in Spanish and they write their ideas as if they were writing in Spanish making their texts a piece very difficult to read. On the other hand they use the vocabulary they think they are familiar with and use it arbitrarily, not paying attention to the context where they are using it, making their texts lack cohesion, and therefore coherence. This is probably based on the fact that up till now, when they are starting university, they have not faced the real need to communicate their ideas by writing where they would have to take into account the audience who is going to read what they write. Providing written corrective feedback strategies are steps that will probably provide students with certain guidance of how to write their ideas.
I have seen that the lack of ability for writing can be the disappointing for some of my students. These learners’ language ego has been affected when they see their written work overcrowded with my observation marks. I have seen they feel fragile or inhibited towards writing and when they do because it is required for homework, they do not want to show their work to the class or they keep it anonymous. I intend to prevent this from happening by paying attention to the way I give feedback, using direct and indirect written corrective feedback strategies to correct written work.

I selected direct and indirect written corrective strategies to help my students overcome their problems with writing; and I considered them the most important issue of this paper because by means of these strategies it was possible to have and insight of the positive or negative effects of written corrective feedback on basic students’ written work.

1.5 Objective

As I mentioned before, writing is one of the four basic language skills to be developed by EFL learners under the MEIF model. However, it is usually the most neglected one because as Harmer (2004) states, it implies working on mental processes to communicate ideas effectively. And, as Raimes (1983) point out, it is an activity that has to be taught with systematic instruction at school. All this makes writing a time-consuming process that only with appropriate planning is possible to be developed successfully within a course. English I and II programs in the MEIF model at the University of Veracruz, state that writing is an ability to be developed along the courses.

The objective of this project is to implement direct and indirect written corrective feedback strategies to help students improve their writing by making them to become aware of the mistakes they make when they write and that this could be interfering with the message they want to express in their compositions.
This will hopefully make them to be willing to work collaboratively on improving their compositions by correcting their writing mistakes.

1.6 Research questions

The main issues of this paper are embedded in the following research questions.

1. How can direct and indirect written corrective strategies motivate my students to write more accurately?
2. What effect can direct and indirect written corrective feedback strategies have on MEIF students taking English II?
3. Which written corrective feedback strategies seem to have had a positive impact on my students’ writing pieces?

1.7 Rationale

As I mentioned before, when I set the context of this research, the Language Centers in the University of Veracruz provide two basic courses of English, English I and English II which require teachers to help their students develop the four basic language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. The writing ability is supposed to be developed using different strategies. However, at the end of these courses it is evident, as the writing exercise at the final exam allows seeing, that there is still a lot to do concerning this skill. The texts produced for the final exam are full of mistakes and most of them barely convey a meaning.

During my teaching practice I have realized that when I have helped my students to write more coherent texts, little by little they acquire more confidence and they structure their ideas more logically. I have always done it as correction practice, but I have never implemented strategies in a formal systematic way and that is exactly what I intend to do with this project. I want to implement some action to find ways to overcome this problem with MEIF students.
Chapter II

Literature Review

1.1 Writing as essential skill for learning a foreign language

One of the essential skills for learning a new language is writing although it is really not the easiest one. I consider that learning to write in the classroom is very important because we can have the aid of teachers who are more familiar with the proper use of language. As Davies and Pearse (2000) say writing is the least used linguistic skill in a native language since unlike speaking, it requires a great deal of reading, specific training and a lot of practice. This is logically due to the fact that as Harmer (2004) says speaking is picked up naturally from being exposed to it, but in order to write one has to learn it consciously. If writing is not that frequent in native language it is even less frequent in a foreign language where students are busy trying to communicate their ideas as best as they can orally. However, in classes of foreign languages it is usual practice for students to copy from the board. They copy vocabulary, phrases and sentences the teacher provides; and that is a starting point into this practice. Students’ first reaction is to copy the model and that is just fine, but the problem is that they are just models that in order to fit different real life situations need to be adapted and modified. It would be impossible for a teacher to provide their students with all the language they will need to express their ideas and that is where learning to write becomes essential. When learning to write, learners are usually required to analyze language more closely. As Davies and Pearse say (2000) writing is more grammatically complete than speech. Speaking is supported by several resources such as tone of voice, gesture and context; however, writing communicates ideas using elements of language alone. As Raimes (1983, p. 4) says “the written language generally demands standard forms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.” Considering these aspects essential for learning a foreign language, this project advocates to work on correcting students mistakes on these areas in order to train them to write more effectively.
1.2 Some relevant definitions:

1.2.1 Strategy
According to B.O. Smith teaching strategy refers to a pattern of teaching acts that serves to attain certain outcomes. A teaching strategy is a purposefully conceived and determined plan of action.

1.2.2 Writing strategies
According to Collins, Writing Strategies are cognitive and meta-cognitive procedures writers use to control the production of writing.

1.2.3 Feedback
Oxford dictionary
1. Information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc., used as a basis for improvement.
2. The modification or control of a process or system by its results or effects.

1.3 Written corrective feedback strategies
Ellis (2012) presents six corrective feedback strategies:
1. Direct
2. Indirect
3. Metalinguistic
4. Focus of the feedback
5. Electronic feedback
6. Reformulation.

Of which he suggests direct and indirect as the most appropriate for basic level students.

1. Direct corrective feedback
The teacher provides the student with the correct form.

As Ferris (2006) notes, this can take a number of different forms – crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase or morpheme, inserting a missing word or morpheme, and writing the correct form above or near the erroneous form.

Ellis points out that this is probably the most used type of corrective feedback. In this type of corrective feedback the teacher can do several things. For example, they can cross out a word and give the correct option.

2. Indirect corrective feedback
According to Ellis in indirect corrective feedback teachers usually indicate the mistake but they do not correct it. This can be done by underlining the errors or
using cursors to show omissions in the students’ texts or by placing a cross in the margin next to the line containing the error. In effect, this involves deciding whether or not to show the precise location of the error. Teachers can also use a list of symbols previously explained to their students, and ask their students to correct mistakes using these symbols as a guide to have an idea what the mistake is.

1.5 Different perspectives on the importance of written corrective feedback (300)

According to Evans et al (2010) “For many years, researchers have debated the value of error correction or written corrective feedback (WCF) in L2. Although numerous studies, including large-scale meta-analyses have been conducted, many have produced conflicting results (Russell & Spada, 2006; Truscott, 2007). For example, some researchers such as Truscott (2007) have claimed that WCF is a ‘clear and dramatic failure’ (p. 271).”

Other researchers such as Sheen who according to Ellis is the one who has done most research on written corrective feedback see that it is of great help for students because it helps them to focus on important things and makes them to reflect on the language they are using to communicate their ideas.
Chapter III

Methodology (3500)
Esta sección describirá la metodología empleada para documentar el fenómeno de interés. Deberá contener las siguientes secciones: diseño del estudio, contexto del estudio, participantes, instrumentos y procedimientos de recolección y organización de datos.

Action research (500)

Data collection (500)

Description of the Implementation (2000)

Data Analysis (500)
Chapter IV

Findings (1500)
Esta sección presentará los resultados de los análisis. Se deberán desarrollar las siguientes secciones: descripción de los modelos/métodos de análisis de los datos, la descripción de los resultados y una síntesis, en un máximo de 100 palabras, de los resultados.

Descripción de los modelos/métodos de análisis de los datos, (700)

Descripción de los resultados y (700)

Síntesis, en un máximo de 100 palabras, de los resultados. (100)
Chapter V

Discussion and Reflections (1500)

En esta sección, se presentarán las interpretaciones y explicaciones de los resultados a partir de las evidencias teórico-empíricas presentadas en la introducción.

Se deberá hacer una profunda discusión de las variables contextuales, pedagógicas y metodológicas que pudieron haber conllevado a los resultados obtenidos. A partir de los resultados obtenidos, esta sección deberá concluir con una propuesta pedagógica para mejorar la enseñanza-aprendizaje de la lengua inglesa en su contexto.

From the
Conclusions and implications (500)

En esta sección, se deberán discutir las contribuciones teórico-prácticas de los resultados, haciendo una revisión de los alcances y limitaciones del trabajo, así como sus implicaciones pedagógicas y las futuras líneas de acción. limitantes
References

Aquí se enlistarán todos los documentos textuales, electrónicos, informáticos, en línea, audio-gráficos, video-gráficos, etc., que sean citados explícitamente en el trabajo. Para tal efecto se observará la normatividad vigente en el Manual de la Asociación Psicológica Americana (APA)

http://www.uv.mx/pampedia/numeross/numero-1/modelo-educativo-integral-fexible-uv.pdf notes on the MEIF model

http://www.uv.mx/personal/mrivas/meif/ notes on areas of MEIF
Appendix

En esta sección, se incluirán los instrumentos o materiales utilizados o desarrollados en la investigación, cuya presentación puede resultar prescindible en el cuerpo del documento pero deseable para eventuales consultas.

**Symbols used to indicate mistakes in writing**

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sp Spelling</td>
<td>Write a letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p Punctuation</td>
<td>Yes thank you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gr Grammar</td>
<td>She play the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vt Verb tense</td>
<td>We see him yesterday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ww Wrong word</td>
<td>Say me the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wo Wrong order</td>
<td>That's a house big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/ Omit</td>
<td>The Peter's desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>^ Something is missing here</td>
<td>I need a pencil</td>
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| | [ ]? Unclear meaning | [He gave them to them]?
| | .. Incomplete sentence | She needed one and I didn’t give ... because |
| | ------ Say this in another way | If it has been made by them |
| | | |
| | | |
| | No concord | He is a doctors |
| | √ Well done. I like this idea | |
| | caps C capital letter | |