

Practical ideas for helping teachers to integrate language skills

Feeding Back to Make a Difference With the Help of Vygotsky, Krashen, Chomsky and a Few Other More Knowing Others

Lynette Faragher

Abstract

This paper describes an experiment in writing feedback and examines the process in terms of Language Acquisition Theory and Vygotskian theory of the ZPD. The positive aspects of the process are described but no claims of success are made. Use is made of authentic learner responses to the process and some suggestions of how future research in this field could be pursued with a hope of finding good ways to provide feedback that will promote language acquisition.

The issue here is the most effective way to provide feedback to students about their writing. In this paper I develop an argument that says that error correction and feedback can influence the ways in which they make meaning. I will engage with received wisdom as learnt from Vygotskian theory that argues that learners produce *transitional* language forms or errors in the process of achieving self-regulation and on Communicative Language Theory of Interlanguage, the Language Acquisition Device, Acquisition vs. Learning and the Monitor Theory.

Krashen's Acquisition vs Learning and Monitor Hypotheses, as well as Chomsky's theory of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and Selinker's interlanguage theory, say that to attempt to intervene in the learner's individual interlanguage journey is pointless; that the acquisition process is autonomous and cannot be forced. If this is so then why do we correct the errors in our students' writing? The answer is that it is our job to teach students what is correct English. We have to tell them even if we know that the best we can hope for is that the information will only be of use to their monitors when they are revising their writing. The challenge is to find a way of intervening in their *interlanguage journey* by responding appropriately to their writing.

If we view their interlanguage as a manifestation of how they are attempting to achieve self-regulation in the language task, *transitional structures*ⁱ (errors) which, in some contexts, are described as *idiosyncratic* forms (Faragher, 1994) reveal the learners' efforts to achieve *self-regulation*. And the peculiarities of L2 discourse can be seen as strategies in other – and object-regulation used by the producers to achieve self-regulation. Therefore the *odd forms* are functional for the knower/producer who is attempting to learn/acquire/use another language (Frawley & Lantolf 1985: 23, cited in Faragher: 18) So we might view interlanguage as consisting of the users' efforts to use a language and that every form used is meaningful to the user and is part of the attempt to communicate and therefore to achieve self-regulation. We might even recognize them as representing learner progress (Horning, A. 1987: 37ⁱⁱ) and provide positive feedback while modeling the correct forms. This attitude will allow us, to admire what they have produced and engage with their ideas and thoughts in a positive interaction that is much more likely to encourage them to continue to hypothesise and write and write better.

In this paper I am going to describe how the attitude described above was embodied in a feedback process. Then I will describe and critique some of the literature I encountered in the area and suggest how Vygotsky's theories of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPDⁱⁱⁱ) and regulation supported the process I had developed.

In the small picture of my writing classes I confronted my own dissatisfaction at what I was doing. I didn't believe that what I did with their writing when it was given to me was of any use to them in terms of helping them acquire the correct forms and vocabulary. What I did was the usual activity that involved reading what they had written and indicating where they had gone wrong, usually by using a series of error symbols. Sometimes I might write a comment, the things that we do to justify our employment, motivate our students or meet their expectations (Ihde, 1995^{iv}).

Nothing has ever seemed to make much difference. So I decided to change what I did and embarked on a feedback project. What follows is the description of what I did. The theory follows.

1. In the writing class the students wrote their first drafts by hand which I corrected in conference with them.
2. The students typed the next draft and submitted it electronically
3. I responded to that draft on computer and edited it using a handout that I had compiled in terms of actual errors made during the course of the editing process. (See Appendix 1. It is still a document in progress.) It consists of a numbered list of how to correct the identified errors; it includes explanations and also directs them to relevant units in Grammar Express^v. It also has notes and comments from the lecturer.
4. The students were invited to submit as many further drafts as they wished until the writing was satisfactory to them.
5. Questionnaires were administered at the end of the blocks to ascertain from the students how they had used the above process.

It was my argument that students would develop their computer skills and develop themselves as writers if this process was followed, this argument is supported by Pennington (1996) who argues that using a computer can transform the way the user writes; she maintains that the computer processor can 'aid the workings of the user's cognitive processor' and that writing, when facilitated by the machine, 'both enables and stimulates a simple and natural writing process'.^{vi}

With the second draft I was able to edit their writing on computer and write to them neatly and more respectfully than using a red pen. I once experimented with not correcting work – just engaging with content and commenting at the end.

The students were quite taken aback, but engaged with the spirit of what I had done one of them said something like, '...much better than getting my work back with all that 'blood' spilt over it...' Two teachers at Bogazici University put it very well.

We have all written papers for some courses to be checked and graded by our instructors. We know very well that a paper that is returned with red markings and notes all over is quite discouraging for the writer. Knowing this, while giving feedback we may of course use pink pens and put smiling faces here and there on the paper but still we see the light in the students' eye fading. If our aim is to win the student instead of discouraging him, we should be looking for ways of giving feedback without losing the student. (Zeliha Gulcat and Oya Ozagac September, 2004
[www.buow.boun.edu.tr/teachers/.](http://www.buow.boun.edu.tr/teachers/))

Here the students used the end of block questionnaires to express their objections and they did not all approve of the demand that they **type** their essays. Some of that first group of students had never used a computer before! I directed them to Mavis Beacon's typing programme and by the time they were finished they were all claiming improved computer skills. This is in line with Noel Williams' advice to build keyboarding skills into writing classes if there is the scope. (1991: 201) It is my argument that students will develop themselves as writers as well as develop their computer skills if this process is followed.

The first drafts are written in the classroom in a controlled situation. It is important that the first drafts are written independently if the teacher is to get a good idea of what is actually going on with the individuals' writing. It is better for Omani students to write on computer as most of their writing experience has been in Arabic so there are added stresses in writing from left to right instead of right to left as well as the different orthography. There would also have been unplanned-for benefits from this exercise^{vii}; Collette Daiute in her book *Writing and Computers* (Addison-Wesley, 1985) said this:

Using the computer as a communication machine has helped many writers feel increased control over the writing process. Writers also gain control of their writing by being able to use a powerful machine to carry out massive, tedious editing tasks quickly and efficiently. When the computer takes over some of the tedious tasks, such as erasing or moving paragraphs and recopying, writers are freer to concentrate on the logic, organization, and clarity of their writing. In these activities,

writers are using their particularly human potential for thinking and expression, rather than focusing on the mechanics of incorporating changes and recopying. (p 29)

The word *massive* would not apply to my students but the idea of freeing them up to think more about *logic, organization and clarity* is very appealing to me however plentiful their surface errors. In response to the question about using the computer one of the students said in the Questionnaire *I feel very happy and I feel like someone does something great*. The initial reading of the handwritten draft in class is more to check that they have understood the task and are shaping the writing appropriately. However corrections in terms of the memo are also made at this stage.

There were also other benefits – there is consensus in the literature that fast feedback is important, the above method made that more likely; there is also consensus that understandable grammar rules should be targeted with examples, my method achieves that; there is also consensus that matters of direct interest to the individual students should be addressed, my method ensures that individual students' work is given individual attention.

So the memo was born, but was it used? This was tested in the questionnaire at the end of the block. Their responses indicated that they had mostly consulted the list and had learnt about their errors – *when I know my mistakes at first time I try to develop my mark next time*. Indeed when asked about them and often when editing the first draft in conference with the student they recognized the errors at the same time as I indicated them. So why did they make the errors if they can recognize them? Perhaps their monitors are not highly enough activated when they are doing the first draft and their creative juices are! Or maybe it is not their time in their individual interlanguage journey to have acquired that form.

In the next block I refined the handout and expanded it, referring them (a new set of students now) to the relevant pages and units in *Grammar Express*. In the Questionnaire at the end of this block they said that they had learnt a lot of grammar. *She give us a paper have number to correct the mistake I think it is useful because I learn the mistakes and when I write another essay I remember the mistakes*. In subsequent class discussion they claimed to have remembered 'the article'.

However, of course, when I marked their end of level quiz there were still article errors! With each new writing task there is a new set of challenges and a new set of possibilities for making mistakes as well as new opportunities for forgetting what they have 'learnt'!. However if we are more flexible and allow for surface errors, and view them as hypotheses, as students experimenting and looking for the appropriate way to make meaning, to achieve self-regulation the entire exercise becomes one in which the students are successful and can move on to more ambitious writing. Recently I asked them to write about a book they had read and I was pleasantly surprised at the amount they were able to write which suggests greater fluency and also how much more easily I was able to read what they had written. So although this is a qualitative assessment, it certainly seems that their writing has improved. Again though, the *caveat* is that the task cited above, was one designed to elicit opinion and the expression of their thoughts and ideas.

In spite of the positive responses the question remains; is the process I have described above of any value to the students? They approved of it and believed that they had learnt something from doing things that way – one student said that the process *push me to research about my mistakes... another one said, easily know and understand mistake help me to think more about sentences that I will write it... Absolutely yes. It give me a determination to write better next time....*, and so on. There is still little concrete evidence that they have acquired the forms that they get wrong time after time. On the other hand I have achieved my goal of being able to respond to their writing in a neat and manageable way, without spending long hours doing it; they are now writing on computer without arguing and mostly liking it and I believe they are more engaged in the tasks and are developing their power and voices. But has the feedback on their errors been effective? What do we mean by *effective*? The students think they have learnt something and they are in a good position to judge. Their work certainly seems to be more confident. They write more and my perception is that there are fewer surface and technical errors. The style could improve as could the use of transitions but we are only now getting into doing the sort of writing that generates those needs. I suppose it is too soon to tell and indeed maybe we have to do a longer research project involving some sort of statistical exercise before we can know for certain what difference if any has been brought about. Furthermore the question of whether this form of feedback in any way alters their rate of acquisition remains unanswered to my satisfaction.

This seemed a good moment to explore the wisdom of others on the subject. It seems that these issues are not new – that what to do about providing effective feedback on the errors in students' writing has been debated ever since we have been teaching students to write. Two high profile researchers – Dana Ferris (1999, 2004) who believes that error correction has positive effects on students' writing and John Truscott (1996, 2004, 2007,) who believes that error correction has little effect and that those are probably negative, have been engaged in an ongoing debate about this since the 1990s and others like John Bitchener (2008) have weighed in with similarly substantial research supporting Ferris, his latest offering being this year. There are many others as well but the above-named seem to have been the most consistent and prolific.

It seems that there are some issues that have not been addressed sufficiently for anyone to claim absolute certainty about the best ways to proceed. The studies tend not to be long enough, they tend to focus on too wide a range of errors, the type of student is not consistent enough, there are not enough studies which involve a control group, the variables around how feedback is delivered are too wide, the writing tasks are not standard (how could they be?) data are cut in different ways and produce different results and so on. This is a very slippery field and the sort of research that has been undertaken has not supplied any absolute answers so far. Probably because the researchers are attempting to quantify the unquantifiable! Language acquisition is a messy business, there are so many variables surrounding the production of output, which is the only way to measure 'uptake' that we, language teachers have to some extent to go with our instincts and our own research and observations.

There is not much reference to language acquisition, theory, and how it might influence the feedback process, except for Jean Chandler (2003: 291) who hoped that providing error feedback would draw attention to form without distracting students from their original communicative intent. She also hoped that helping them notice a mismatch between their interlanguage and the target language *might well facilitate second language acquisition*. She reported that once the errors had been indicated subsequent student writing was both significantly more correct, in just 10 weeks, and done significantly more quickly, with a slight increase in the quality of the content. She is one of the few who also tracked individual students. (Chandler, 2003) However John Truscott (2004) criticized her findings severely because her research, among other criticisms, could not rule out the possibility that her students' improvements had been brought about by some other factors than the sort of error correction they had received. This is the fundamental problem in all of this type of research – how to eliminate the other variables that influence language acquisition? It is probably not possible. The discussion needs to move in a different direction and towards different issues, as it is clear that there is little evidence that any sort of particular error correction is more or less effective than any other.

Last year on his blog <http://secondlanguagewriting.com/explorations/> Charles Nelson reported on other areas of learning theory in the context of posts on error correction and feedback. He quoted Philip Ross's article "The Expert Mind" (in *Scientific American*) where he makes the point that it takes at least 10 years for anyone to become an expert in anything including learning a language, so we must understand that the business of language acquisition is a long one – at least 10 years of intense practice and he stated further that that process cannot be accelerated^{viii}. He said that according to Skill Acquisition Theory it is important to have rules that are not obscure, to have examples of the rules and to have understandable explanations of those rules. I think that my feedback memo fulfils those last criteria. Nelson also discussed motivation in terms of self-determination theory and flow theory. He mentioned 6 needs and conditions and my process fulfils all of them; autonomy, social relatedness, informational feedback that supports autonomy, clear goals, immediate feedback and tasks that challenge without unduly frustrating one's skills. According to those ideas our process is as it should be.

All of that is supportive but it also is clear that what we do is palliative and not curative. I do accept Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis (Krashen, 1987) that suggests that knowledge about grammar can be useful when a person reviews what they have written and I must say that that could explain why some of my students immediately recognize a mistake when we jointly edit their first drafts. Of course it also suggests that they haven't read it through critically before bringing it to me! As we look at the text together and I put my pen at an error they often will self-correct. Quite often they will recognize the 3rd person present tense – s, or sometimes number agreement or past tense and plurals but pronoun concord, articles and perfect tenses are seldom recognized. I know that this is anecdotal but those are the errors that persist. One of them said to me recently, when we were editing his work, *I know that but when I am writing I am not thinking about how to write correctly – I want to say what I want*. He wanted to be free to write fluently. I want to encourage

that sort of thinking and believe that the more I interact positively with the students in their ZPD and the more they read and write the more they will acquire and the better they will write.

Noam Chomsky said something supportive about this in 1968:

My own feeling is that from our knowledge of the organization of language and of the principles that determine language structure one cannot immediately construct a teaching programme. All we can suggest is that a teaching programme be designed in such a way as to give free play to those creative principles that humans bring to the process of language learning and, I presume, to the learning of anything else. I think we should probably try to create a rich linguistic environment for the inductive heuristics that the normal human automatically possesses. (p690) (Noam Chomsky and Stuart Hampshire discuss the study of language. *Listener*, 1968, May: 687-691)^{ix}.

I am not going to proceed without correcting my writing students' work although that is where my instincts lead. I cannot relinquish that habit but I suggest that using the process of an initial conference in class with the first handwritten draft and using the feedback memo is a positive process – it is an example of social interaction in the ZPD. We know that a positive context for learning is always in concert with others so that condition is fulfilled as are other conditions that constitute the ZPD.

Kelly Chandler (1996) describes a process in which she successfully applied the theories of the ZPD and Self-regulation (Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind and Society* (1978)) in her dealings with an individual writing student and later her whole class. According to this theory, social interaction underpins learning and this interaction happens in the ZPD between the student and the teacher, *the more knowing other* and leads to self-regulation. Self-regulation is *the child's capacity to plan, guide, and monitor his behaviour from within and flexibly according to changing circumstances*^x. Van Lier's (1996) interpretation of the ZPD sheds more light on my particular argument, he says that

At any given point... there is a range of knowledge and skills which (a) person can only access with someone's assistance... This material, which one might say is within reach, constitutes the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). Anything outside the circle of proximal development is simply beyond reach and not (yet) available for learning (cited in Anderson et al, 2001).

The result of Chandler's interaction with her student was that a young writer who was self-assessed as not very talented changed into one who showed promise and saw herself as someone who could write. Chandler also changed her practice as a writing teacher and introduced methodology that enabled her to function effectively *as the more capable other*^{xi}. She was able to personalize the feedback sessions and in her article she described how she took Amy, her first subject, through a series of stages in the writing process starting with big picture analysis of her problems and moved on to responding to the request for help with grammar and mechanics so instead of working through grammar exercises ...*Paragraph by paragraph we edited Amy's work together, eliminating surface errors.* (p8)

What I have been doing is similar to Kelly Chandler as well as Charles Nelson's summary of the right way to do it with regard to the sort of rules that are given and explained and the six conditions for motivation. Furthermore the corrective feedback I provide is as described in much of the reviewed literature and in addition it conforms to the three criteria described by Al Saadi (2000: 37-38) of being sensitive, effective and of matching the students' preferences^{xii}. The responses to the questionnaires support the above assertion. None complained of feeling disempowered or invaded – on the contrary they were positive; they claim to have learnt more grammar and to have liked this way of getting feedback. So why am I still not satisfied?

What we have done is develop a different correction memo from any described in the current literature and our writing process has become something that makes a difference in that we know now about how to write correctly. We now use technology very effectively and this has contributed to writing proficiency and better use of feedback but I want us to be able to show that we have learnt something and that what has been achieved through social interaction in the ZPD is used to good effect in the writing monitor and assists the students to achieve self-regulation.

Cozens and Knowling described how feedback sheets, on-line communication and writing journals were used to excellent effect to develop students' metacognition, writing proficiency and confidence. (Coombe et

al, 2008: 241-8) If we adapted this model it might be possible to satisfy statistical demands. Furthermore if we adopted a process that involved notes and records being kept in reflective journals by students and teachers, data could then be collected and analysed and valid conclusions drawn. There could be a rich record of how writers develop through mediation and mentoring. This sort of data collection might not be well regarded by some researchers but in his review of *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* edited by James Lantolf, OUP, 2000, Alex Kozulin commented on two writers who had analysed first person narratives of people who had become bilingual as adults – he said that such material is often marginalized in SLA research as ‘anecdotal’ but that the writers had argued that if our goal is to understand SLA and practice as meaningful components of the development of human personality we cannot neglect these data. (*British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2002: 143). We too could learn much about how our students change and develop through our mediation and interventions if we adopt some or all of the processes described and validated above.

- ⁱ ‘the language forms language users use while they are still learning the grammar of the language’ (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982: 121, cited in Ellis, 1986: 59).
- ⁱⁱ Horning draws heavily on Selinker who after all originated interlanguage theory.
- ⁱⁱⁱ ... is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind and Society* (1978).
- ^{iv} In fairness to Ihde, he was saying it should not happen like this.
- ^v Grammar Express by Fuchs Bonner and Burke Longman – the grammar reference book that is issued to all students.
- ^{vi} Cited by Christine Thorne: *Academic Reading and Writing in the 21st Century: the impact of New Technologies TESOL Arabia Perspectives*. Vol 15, no. 1, November, 2007.
- ^{vii} This was to be expected and was the right thing to do according to Williams. Noel, *The Computer, the Writer and the Learner* Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 1991
- ^{viii} There are methodologies that will enable learners to acquire a language in a much shorter time but this writer was not taking them into account.
- ^{ix} Cited in Rutherford, & Sharwood Smith (eds) *Grammar and Second Language Teaching* Newbury House Publishers New York 1988
- ^x Diaz, R., Neal, C. & Amaya-Williams, M. (1990: 130) The social origins of self-regulation. In L. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implication and applications of sociohistorical psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Cited in Chandler (p.9)
- ^{xi} *Because I no longer tried to take all 24 students through the same sequence of activities, I could plan more appropriate, individualized instruction for each of them. I could spend more one-on-one time with each of them at least once a week. Last, but certainly not least important, I could provide them with opportunities to make choices, to work independently, and to practice being self-regulators of their own learning in a structured situation.* (p9).
- ^{xii} In the questionnaires administered to my classes the responses to Question 2 *Did you find this way of getting feedback was useful?* was overwhelmingly positive.

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