

The Effect of Reformulation on Noticing and Subsequent Writing Development

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Abstract: The important role of noticing as a cognitive process in second language (L2) acquisition has been increasingly recognized and investigated by ELT researchers. The present paper seeks to investigate how reformulation as an effective type of providing corrective feedback can promote noticing and subsequently writing composition skills. The study was conducted with four adult Iranian EFL learners in IELTS classes. The study documents the relationship between reformulation and noticing in writing composition. The findings suggest that composing and providing corrective feedback in the form of reformulation promote noticing and this can eventually lead to the betterment of writing skills by the learners.

Key words: Noticing · Corrective feedback and reformulation · Composition writing

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade or two, “noticing” has been receiving an increasing amount of attention from applied linguistics researchers [1-5]. Its significance for second language (L2) acquisition can be understood from such claims as “those who notice most, learn most” [6. p. 313] and “no noticing, no acquisition” [1. p. 89].

Noticing is also an important cognitive process in L2 composing. Issues such as how noticing is related to L2 writing skills and what effect it has on L2 writing improvement still need to be talked about and investigated, especially through empirical research studies. Indeed, in order to help learners improve their L2 writing skills and assist them to achieve native-like writing proficiency, teachers need to make their learners notice their gaps. Due to the complex nature of writing itself and the unique characteristics of L2 writing [7], developing strategies and applying techniques that promote noticing is of crucial importance. This article aims at investigating the effect of one of these techniques called reformulation (as one type of providing corrective feedback) on noticing and its further impact on the improvement of the learners' writing ability.

This article also aims at investigating what learners notice when they are composing by themselves and when they are comparing their own written text to a reformulated version of it and what effects such noticing has on the quality of their written text.

Background: How can providing appropriate feedback type promote noticing? Noticing is a concept of interest of many researchers and scholars of this field and as such different definitions stressing different dimensions in learning have been proposed by different scholars. For the purpose of this article, we would like to define “noticing” broadly as awareness of a stimulus via short-term memory [2]. We refer to “stimulus” as anything that rouses one's attention, in particular, for our purposes, with respect to language (input or output). Our stance in this article is that while noticing of input is exceedingly important, noticing as a result of producing the target language (TL), as in the context of L2 composing, also has important roles to play in L2 development.

Swain and Lapkin's [5] study examines directly the noticing function of output in the context of L2 writing, asking if learners' own output can lead them to a conscious awareness of language problems they are experiencing, if cognitive processes are triggered in response to the problems they are aware of and if learners engage in grammatical analysis in the processes. The participants were asked to think aloud while composing in response to a writing task. The study demonstrated that the young French-immersion L2 writers did indeed notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge while producing their L2 in the composing process. The researchers also found that when they encountered difficulties in producing the TL, they did engage in certain thought processes that may play a role in L2 learning, including grammatical analysis that was considered essential to accurate production.

Some research has tried to identify factors that may influence the effectiveness of written feedback. When L2 learners' incorrect hypotheses and inappropriate generalizations lead to errors in their written texts, appropriate feedback from the teacher is needed in order to help learners correct these errors. Zhang's [8] research indicates that L2 learners genuinely and overwhelmingly welcome feedback, especially from the teacher. Error correction is also what most learners want.

One factor that may affect the effectiveness of written feedback is that the teacher's feedback may be unclear, inaccurate and may lack balance among form, content and style [9. p. 155]. A second factor may relate to a possible lack of sensitivity of teachers to different contexts as well as to varying levels of need, ability and other individual differences of students in providing feedback [10-11].

Another critical factor, as we view it, is that the type of feedback the teacher offers to the learner does not provide optimal conditions to help learners notice their errors, i.e., the gap between their IL and the TL when they receive feedback. A review of research in the literature suggests that there seems to be a debate over issues such as form/meaning focus [12-13] and effectiveness of teachers' comments or error correction [14-16].

Reformulation is one type of corrective feedback which may genuinely promote noticing and subsequently may improve L2 writing ability of an L2 learner. The idea of reformulation was first proposed by [17] to challenge Corder's [18] notion of reconstruction (reconstruction is a limited type of error correction that only acts at surface levels). Reformulation refers to a native speaker's rewriting of an L2 learner's composition such that the content the learner provides in the original draft is maintained, but its awkwardness, rhetorical inadequacy, ambiguity, logical confusion, style and so on as well as lexical inadequacy and grammatical errors are tidied up [18]. The rewritten text provides a TL model so that the learner can make a comparison of his/her own draft with a native writer's version of it.

In the early 1980s, Cohen [19-20] conducted several research studies to investigate the effectiveness of reformulation and reported that learners at intermediate levels and above seem to benefit from using this technique [21]. His research results show that the L2 writers benefited from reformulation in such aspects as vocabulary, syntax and paragraphing, as well as cohesion. Through reformulation, the learners gained insights about problems of cohesion, grammatical rules, precision in the use of vocabulary and differences in levels of formality in the TL.

Reformulation has advantages that other types of feedback may lack. For one thing, it provides relevant TL structures to allow the learner to use them according to his/her own needs and interests. This is important because preferences for the teacher's feedback may vary from student to student [10] and the teacher's response should respect the students' right to their own expression and their intention in a given piece of writing [21]. Secondly, a text reformulated by a competent TL writer provides appropriate TL forms for the given context. Thirdly, this type of feedback provides a good balance between focus on form and focus on meaning since it employs both the meaning-driven and form-focused potential.

Sanaoui [22] studied the use of reformulation in a classroom environment. The results of the study demonstrate that although there are glaring differences between better writers and poorer writers, all her students benefited from the use of the reformulation approach in such areas as selection of vocabulary, syntactic structures, markers of cohesion, discourse functions, overall organization and their attitude towards the reader.

A key function of reformulation is that it provides the opportunity for noticing. If cognitive comparison (between IL and TL) is an important part of learning, we need to choose feedback types based on their potential to promote noticing and error analysis (EA).

Some criteria for appropriate types of feedback should be their potential to encourage learners to pay attention to form and, moreover, provide learners with TL data so that they can make comparisons between their IL and a TL model of it. Thornbury [23] proposes that reformulation is one feedback type that meets these criteria. He argues that exposing learners to the target behavior after the event - rather than providing a model beforehand - has greater psychological validity, in that the learners are predisposed to look out for (and notice) those features of the modeled behavior that they themselves had found problematic in the initial trial run. That is why reformulation, rather than other types of feedback, was selected for the purpose of this study.

The Study: This research is the result of a study conducted on four adult EFL learners, studying IELTS in two different classes. One of its objectives is to explore the roles played by written output in L2 learning. It aimed at investigating the idea that how output can promote noticing in a three-phase L2 writing task performed by individuals with different levels of L2 proficiency.

In this task participants were first asked to write an L2 text on a selected topic. Then they were asked to compare their written draft with a reformulated version of it followed by an immediate interview intended to understand what they had noticed. Finally, we gave the participant their original text and asked them to revise it. By examining each of the three phases, we intended to investigate the effects of noticing in output and its scope at each separate stage and also collaboratively. Thus, our research questions in this study were as follows:

- What do L2 learners notice as they compare their text to a reformulated version of it?
- How is such noticing related to changes in the final written text?

Methodology

Participants: The participants in this study were four adult Iranian EFL learners attending an IELTS class (we had separate classes for each couple). The participants were aged 24 to 28, all holding a bachelor's degree in different majors. These participants had different levels of English. In class A, the male participant had a better command of English. He had studied English as a foreign language for over 6 years before registering for this class. At the time of our data collection for this study, he was in his last semester of his English language program at an institute. The female participant of this class had studied English as a foreign language for almost 3 years, non-continuously. In class B, we had almost the same situation. Again the male participant had a higher level of L2 knowledge as compared to his wife (the male participant had his diploma of English from Iran Language Institute and has been in contact with English via self study, while the female participant had stopped her English class at pre-intermediate level, four years ago). These couples aimed at passing IELTS exam as a prerequisite for furthering their studies abroad.

Procedures: Each participant was asked to write a composition on a selected topic by the teacher (the teacher tried to provide the students with general topics to minimize the effect of the learners' specialized knowledge of their majors). Each participant was given 20 minutes to do the written task. Each participant was asked to proofread his/her writing in the end before submitting it to the teacher. The purpose was to make sure that the draft represented the participant's best possible version and that the errors were not of minor types that could

have been corrected by the learners themselves. After the termination of this phase, the teacher collected the texts and reformulated it from beginning to end to produce a native-like model. In the reformulated version, the participant's original ideas were maintained. We corrected all the syntactic and morphological errors and removed any problems in stylistics and logical sequencing at the discourse level.

One week later, the participants received their original draft and also the reformulated version of it. They were asked to compare them together and try to notice the differences between the two versions. A week later, all the participants did a posttest. The participants were not informed of the posttest in advance. For the posttest, each participant received his/ her own original written draft, which was typed and was asked to revise his/her draft right on the typed version based on what he/she had learnt during the task process. Then they rewrote their first draft with regard to the points they had noticed after comparing their text with the reformulated version. In sum, each participant produced two versions, one in the initial phase and the other from the last phase. All versions produced by the participants were transcribed for analysis.

For a better analysis of the data, the authors identified the language related elements in both versions of writing transcripts and noticed problematic cases. The authors then coded these elements into three broad categories as follows: (1) lexis - adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, pronoun and verb; (2) form - comparative (adjective), superlative (adjective), plural, possessive marker, possessive pronoun, punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, subject-verb agreement, verb form and verb tense; (3) discourse - achieving logical sequencing (cohesion, coherence), sentential clarity and stylistics [25].

RESULTS

Overall, the results of the study have shown that in such an L2 writing task, language related noticing may contribute to the improvement of L2 writing. Furthermore, the results indicate that reformulation, rather than surface correction only, can promote noticing on certain areas of language (form, meaning, organization, etc). As such, among the other types of corrective feedback, reformulation can in the best way enhance noticing and therefore can contribute to the betterment of L2 writing.

The results also show that noticing of language-related points in a writing task, along with production in the process, may not only promote subsequent problem-solving performance during the solo composing activity but also trigger noticing of relevant information from the modeled TL data when available in the later stage of a writing task.

The results of the study also demonstrate that quality of noticing in the comparison phase has direct implications for the final written product in the last phase. This finding suggests that while promoting noticing in a reformulation task may be important, improving the quality of noticing may be even more important.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The quantity of noticing while composing and the quality of such noticing in the comparison phase of the writing, may be different for learners with different levels of L2 proficiency. The results demonstrate that learners with a higher level of L2 proficiency may be able to conduct more language-related noticing while composing alone than learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency. Further, learners with a higher level of L2 proficiency may be more capable of solving the noticed problems by themselves while composing alone than learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency. When comparing their own written draft with a reformulated version of it, learners with a higher level of L2 proficiency may accept more reformulated items or structures, than learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency. This suggests that learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency may have more difficulty identifying the nature of the gap between their IL and the TL even though a TL model is provided to them. Thus, quality of noticing may be related to level of L2 proficiency. This finding is in line with Cohen's [20] claim that reformulation may benefit "learners at intermediate levels and above" and "may have its greatest impact among advanced students" [25]. One explanation for the influence of the level of L2 proficiency on the quality of noticing may be that learners with a low level of L2 proficiency have limited linguistic knowledge of the TL, which may affect their judgement about what is right or wrong and why.

With this in mind, we derive several implications for L2 writing pedagogy. Like Swain and Lapkin [24] and Cohen [25], we suggest that reformulation is a valid pedagogical tool and that the positive modeling of native-like writing may be more helpful to the learner than error

correction (negative feedback). It appears important for teachers to promote language-related noticing in L2 composing.

Second, the teacher may need to train learners, especially those with a lower level of L2 proficiency, how to notice the gap between their own draft text and the reformulated text. This may mean that the teacher may need to organize some awareness-raising activities in reformulation tasks.

Nevertheless, one limitation the present study suffers from is that due to the relatively small sample group of participants in this study, we consider that the findings obtained are more or less tentative.

In conclusion, the results of the study suggest that language-related noticing does have a direct impact on students' written products and that output can promote opportunities for such noticing both during the composing phase and via the feedback provided by a reformulation of learners' written texts. Further, the quality of the noticing may differ according to the learners' level of proficiency and may affect their capacity to benefit from the reformulation. In short, how to improve noticing quality especially for learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency may be a crucial issue to be addressed in L2 writing pedagogy.

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