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## **Foreign Language students' perceptions of a reflective approach to text correction**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a teaching model developed to encourage second-year university students of Italian to reflect upon their writing process and to consider error correction as an active source of learning. While composing their own autobiography, students were encouraged to draw on teacher indirect feedback in order to self-correct errors, to incorporate this feedback in the redrafting of text, and to reflect on their use of linguistic forms. It is argued that this combination of teaching strategies – which forms the model explored in this paper – plays a crucial role in assisting students to take responsibility for their own learning.

To develop this argument, this paper firstly outlines the academic background and the teaching context from which the model was developed. Secondly, it describes the key components of the model and their application in a second-year Italian course at Griffith University. In particular, it explores a reflective approach to text correction, which combines direct and indirect feedback and aims to foster independence from teacher intervention and reflection on learning strategies. Thirdly, it analyses student perceptions of this model in order to clarify its educational value in a foreign language (FL) learning context. It concludes by identifying pedagogical implications for future applications.

### **1. Background**

In recent years, reflective learning has attracted increasing attention in second and foreign language teaching. Little (2002) considers reflection an important language learning step, without which learners cannot accept responsibility for their own learning. Pennington (1992) stresses how language students can benefit from conscious attempts to improve their effectiveness through consideration not only of learning outcomes but also of the strategies they use to achieve these outcomes. Murphy (2001), however, observes the difficulties students can face when engaging in reflective activities alone and notes the key role the teacher plays in explaining the purpose and benefits of reflecting on performance.

The teaching model presented in this paper draws on this notion of reflective learning, particularly on Richards' (1994) definition of reflection as a process of learning from experience, in which self-inquiry is regarded as a key component of a learner's development. This concept of reflection is considered in the context of language learners developing their writing. Specifically, the teaching model looks at teacher feedback on grammatical errors as a means to encourage students to critically study their own written performance in the target language with the goal of improving not only their linguistic competence and skill, but also their ability to learn.

Ever since Corder (1974) highlighted the importance of considering errors in the language learning process, researchers and teachers have discussed issues relating to the causes of language learning errors; the importance of errors in the process of learning; and whether teachers should react to learners' errors or not, and if so how (Allwright and Bailey 1991:83). More recently, the debate about whether or not to correct written grammatical mistakes has been revived by Truscott's claim that "grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned" (1996:328). Ferris' provides a counter argument that distinct approaches to error correction need to be identified and that correction "which is selective, prioritized and clear can and does help at least some student writers" (1999:4).

The model described in this paper has been influenced by Ferris' discussion of the merit of indirect feedback. By engaging students in problem solving, indirect feedback leads to a greater cognitive engagement and to reflection on linguistic forms, which in turn may promote language acquisition (Ferris 2002:19). Indirect feedback is a form of correction where the teacher indicates in some way that an error exists but does not provide the correction. Direct feedback, on the other hand, occurs when the teacher provides the correct form to the student. Studies examining the effects of these different types of error feedback on students' second language (L2) writing, have reported positive impacts of indirect feedback on the ability of students to edit their own composition and to improve levels of accuracy in writing (Bitchener 2005; Chandler 2003; Ferris 1995b; Ferris and Roberts 2001; Lalande 1982; Lee 1997).

Dana Ferris (1995a, 1995b) has designed a discovery approach to written correction based on indirect feedback by which she aims to help advanced English as a second language (ESL) students identify their own errors and become more self-sufficient as editors. Ferris argues that for correction to be more effective for students, teachers need to address at least the following three pedagogical factors. Firstly, students should be made aware of the significance of correction in the process of writing; secondly, correction should be selective and focused on the most frequent error patterns rather than single errors; and thirdly, feedback should be provided on preliminary drafts of essays, rather than final drafts.

Two principle factors were considered in the design of this teaching model: the learning value of indirect feedback, and the efficacy of writing more than one draft of the same text. It was decided to experiment with indirect feedback in order to engage students actively in self-analysis of their own L2 performance. Redrafting was used to encourage students to pay more effective attention to teacher feedback (Ferris 1995a).

In addition, this model experimented with a selective, personalized, indirect type of feedback. The assumption was that by actively engaging learners, this type of feedback would encourage them to look critically at their own L2 performance and promote "noticing" of language problems. As pointed out by Swain (1998:66-67), when "noticing" – as a conscious act of attention to language form – happens in one's own output it serves to raise awareness of "holes" in interlanguage – that is, it may prompt learners to become more aware of their linguistic problems.

Most of the literature on error feedback on writing refers to SL learners with at least a post-intermediate language level (Bitchener et al. 2005; Ferris 1995b; Lee 1997). The needs and intentions for improvement in the writing skills of these students go well beyond the language course, as a high standard of writing is demanded of them by the academic and/or non-academic community.

Foreign language learners, however, may not experience the same situational imperative, as they do not need to use their target language to operate and survive in the wider community. In addition, less advanced learners might feel that they are not capable of self-editing because of their limited linguistic competence and thus seek complete assistance from their teachers (Ferris 2002:79).

The teaching model explored in this paper is aimed at lower intermediate university students for whom Italian is not a second language but a foreign one, and whose intentions for developing writing skills are mainly linked to the successful completion of the language course. It is expected that less competent learners would develop a more independent and reflective approach to their writing, when guided and encouraged in a supportive non-threatening way.

## **2. The teaching context**

At Griffith University the second-year Italian program is focused on the development of writing skills. As part of the course *Written Italian*, second-year students attend a weekly two-hour writing laboratory, which requires them to regularly produce their own texts. In response to issues, which had emerged the previous year and appeared to be problematic for the development of students as writers, a new approach to text correction was trialled for one semester. Students had tended to overlook teacher correction and recurring errors, and had difficulty integrating feedback into their writing. They seemed more concerned with their mark rather than with understanding the feedback they had received, and perceived correction as a final response to their writing, rather than as a step in the process of learning how to write.

Twenty-eight students participated in the trial of the new teaching model. Eighteen of them had started learning Italian for the first time at university and prior to enrolling in *Written Italian* had completed three semesters of Italian language, attending no more than 180 contact hours. The others had completed equivalent courses at other institutions or studied Italian at high school.

## **3. The teaching model**

To encourage students to make the correction of their work an integral part of the process of writing and to take up a more active role in the editing process, a teaching model was developed with the dual aim of improving learners' editing skills and enhancing their ability to reflect on the function and value of correction.

### **3.1 Promoting self-editing through indirect feedback and redrafting**

As previously stated, the two principles guiding the activities aimed at enhancing students' editing skills were the learning value of indirect feedback, and the efficacy of writing more than one draft of the same text. Experimenting with indirect feedback and redrafting entailed modifying the course assessment structure. In the past, as part of the writing laboratory component of the course, students had to submit an

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assessment item completed at home every two weeks, which involved writing a composition of about 300 words on a personal or current life issue. As part of the new approach, students were asked to write their autobiography in six chapters. Each chapter had a rather general topic and was written in several drafts. The revised final draft was posted on the university web page for *Written Italian* so that students could share their work.

The choice of autobiographical writing as an assessment task was based on the assumption that students would be more motivated to experiment with new writing strategies when writing compositions that had value to them, not just as learners but as individuals (Butler & Bentley 1992). Furthermore, it was hoped that by sharing their product with the whole class, students would be encouraged to pay more attention to the accuracy of their texts, and would be prepared to work on more than one draft to achieve that accuracy.

When marking students' compositions selective indirect feedback was given to the initial draft, while their final draft was returned to them with comments and direct feedback. When giving indirect feedback, the teacher selected errors, which were most frequent, were interfering with the comprehensibility of the text or were related to language areas studied in the course. Two different types of indirect feedback were used. In the first three chapters the teacher underlined errors and used a code to indicate the type of error. In the second three chapters, the teacher underlined the errors but did not code them. Students were then asked to self-edit and resubmit their work. Subsequently they received comments and direct feedback on their editing activity and on the new draft of their composition, and were asked to submit a revised electronic version of their chapter for the course web page.

Table 1 shows the codes used when giving indirect feedback on the first three chapters.

**Table 1: Codes used to indicate error types in indirect feedback**

1 CODE	2 MEANING
SP <i>spelling</i>	Spelling error Punctuation
NA <i>noun agreement</i>	Article, adjective and noun agreement Incorrect noun gender Pronoun-noun agreement
VA <i>verb agreement</i>	Subject-verb agreement Incorrect auxiliary
VT <i>verb tense</i>	Wrong verb tense
WC <i>word choice</i>	Wrong word/expression
SS <i>sentence structure</i>	Wrong word order Unnecessary or missing words

When asked to self-edit their compositions, students received a follow-up reflective sheet advising them to pay particular attention to the recurring types of

error, to their ability to correct them, and to their use of specific language structures and text conventions.

### 3.2 Promoting reflection on learning strategies

Throughout the implementation of this teaching model, it was considered critical to encourage students to think about the impact that this new learning experience was having on their current approach to writing as well as on their Italian competence. Accordingly, class activities, student surveys, and class discussions were developed to assist learners to reflect upon their learning. These tools also provided teachers with an understanding of the impact this learning experience was having on students.

At the beginning of the semester a survey invited students to indicate their preferences in error correction in terms of type of preferred teacher feedback, type of errors to have corrected, and strategies used for taking onboard teacher corrections. A subsequent class activity was carried out to raise their awareness of the importance of using effective strategies for reflecting on, recollecting and incorporating the language points being corrected.

The activity illustrated in Figure 1 took place after students had self-corrected their first chapter following teacher indirect feedback, and after they had received teacher comments on their self-editing work and their autobiography text. At this stage students had not been requested to rewrite their draft. Part 1 of the activity asked them to read their original draft again, to identify errors they had made and to correct them. Parts 2 and 3 encouraged them to think first individually and then as a group about strategies used to retain feedback.

The unexpected difficulty students encountered in recollecting where they had gone wrong and recorrecting their work served as a springboard both for their own reassessment of the validity of strategies used so far and for a lively and profitable exchange of experience in the group discussion. This student-led discussion also gave the teacher the opportunity to share the outcomes from the survey and to discuss the relevance of indirect feedback and redrafting in enhancing editing skills.

**Figure 1: Recorrecting activity**

<b>Part 1</b>	Last week you self-edited your autobiography, then you received your <i>Chapter 1</i> with teacher corrections. Look again at your original draft of <i>Chapter 1</i> . Identify the parts of the text where you went wrong and correct them.
<b>Part 2</b>	First individually and then with another two students consider the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were you able to remember where you went wrong in your text?</li> <li>• Were you able to correct errors?</li> <li>• What did you do with your <i>Chapter 1</i> when your teacher returned it to you with feedback? (e.g. you rewrote the whole homework; read it carefully without rewriting anything; etc.)</li> <li>• What helps you to understand errors you have made?</li> <li>• What helps you to remember corrections?</li> </ul>
<b>Part 3</b>	Report back to the class on the outcomes of your group discussion

#### 4. Student perceptions

Students were surveyed at the beginning and at the end of the semester to determine the impact they perceived that the exposure to a reflective approach to text correction was having on their writing. The beginning-of-semester survey included questions that encouraged students to think about their preferences in error correction in terms of the type of feedback they preferred and perceived as more useful for their learning and the type of errors they would like their teacher to correct. It also asked students to indicate how they used corrections to enhance their learning.

The end-of-semester survey featured: two questions from the initial survey regarding student preferences in error correction; one question asking them to comment on the learning value of redrafting a composition; and a series of statements where, on a five point scale, students were invited to indicate how often they could remember corrections and how often they could notice and self-edit errors in specific language areas. Students were surveyed to address the following questions:

1. How do intermediate FL students perceive direct and indirect feedback, once they have been regularly exposed to it?
2. Do students view redrafting as a useful activity to develop accuracy in writing?
3. Do students consider that a more reflective approach to text correction helps in retaining feedback and if so, in what language areas?
4. Do students feel that a more reflective approach to text correction promotes their ability to self-correct and notice errors and if so, in what language areas?

##### 4.1 Student perceptions of direct and indirect feedback

One section of both the initial and final surveys dealt with student preferences in error correction and aimed to explore whether any change of preference had occurred during the semester (Table 2).

Over the semester there was a shift in student preference for method of correction from direct to indirect feedback. At the beginning of the semester most of the students (75%) said they preferred a direct method, whereas at the end, the percentage of those who preferred a direct method was just over half of the cohort (54%).

Student perceptions of the usefulness of these correction methods in relation to their own learning also changed. Initially, they thought the direct method was helping them to avoid repeating the same error, whereas by the end of the semester they perceived indirect feedback, with codes, to be slightly more beneficial in this respect.

**Table 2: Student preferences for correction method in initial and final surveys**

<i>How do you prefer your teacher to indicate an error in your written work?</i>		
	<i>Initial Questionnaire</i>	<i>Final Questionnaire</i>
The teacher crosses out what is incorrect and writes in the correct word or structure	75%	54%
The teacher shows where the error is and indicates what type of error it is	25%	42%

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The teacher only shows where the error is	/	4%
<i>What type of correction do you find useful in helping you to avoid making the same error again?</i>		
That the teacher writes the correct word or structure	66%	46%
That the teacher shows where the error is and indicates what type of error it is	30%	50%
That the teacher only shows where the error is	4%	4%

At the end of the semester students still liked direct feedback slightly more (54% of students indicated it as their preferred correction method), while indirect feedback without codes remained the least popular of the techniques throughout the semester.

A closer look at the reasons why students said they preferred, or found more helpful, one type of feedback over the other, revealed what students considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of each correction method. Students felt that indirect feedback enhanced comprehension of the type of error made, expanded grammar knowledge, encouraged learner autonomy, and promoted a way of thinking which aided retention of corrections and attention to recurring errors. However, indirect feedback was perceived as time-consuming and frustrating, particularly when dealing with vocabulary and syntactic problems. This is illustrated by the following students' remarks:

- To think or reflect on my errors helps with my understanding.
- I like the idea of self-correction because you have to think about what mistakes you have made rather than just passively read a whole heap of corrections.
- I find I remember the mistakes and their correct form if I've worked out the answer for myself. However, I think this is difficult when it comes to vocabulary and sentence structure.

Direct feedback was considered to trigger visual memory; to give a feeling of security by its provision of exact information about errors and correct alternatives; and to show errors students could not see. Some commented though, that direct correction did not encourage consideration of the nature of the error and made them prone to just accept teacher correction without questioning it. The following observations are typical of what students wrote about direct feedback:

- [I prefer direct feedback] because I need to know what is correct, often I am not sure if I am right.
- It is clearly written in front of you so it is easier to remember.
- Sometimes it is hard to figure out the error and how to correct it.
- When the correct word is written down by the teacher, it doesn't help me think about it the next time I come across the problem.

While some students, in the final survey, indicated direct feedback was their preferred correction method, they still considered indirect feedback to be the most beneficial to their learning. A follow up discussion with those students clarified what at first seemed contradictory. Two factors emerged. Firstly, some students liked a

combination of indirect feedback with direct feedback, rather than one single correction method. They preferred to first self-edit their autobiography chapter and then receive direct feedback on their text and self-editing work. Secondly, some found that the combination of assessment in the course and other university and personal commitments did not allow them to dedicate as much time to their autobiography writing as they would have liked. Consequently, although they appreciated the learning value of indirect feedback, they found direct feedback a faster and easier way to revise assessment items, given their time constraints. It would seem that, at times, it is not the students' perception of the validity of a learning strategy that affects its use, but rather their capacity to cope with external factors affecting their studies.

## **4.2 Student perceptions of redrafting**

The second question concerns whether students perceived redrafting as a useful activity. During the semester students were requested to rewrite each chapter of their autobiography incorporating feedback received. In the final survey students were asked to comment upon this type of activity.

Data shows that almost all of the students (92%) considered redrafting to be beneficial to their writing and in their answers it is possible to identify three recurring reasons. Firstly, writing a revised draft of each chapter enhanced recollection of correct language structures. Secondly, it strongly encouraged them to reflect on and pay individual attention to each one of their errors. Thirdly, it enabled them to see how their writing would look in its "best form". The following comments show students' appreciation of the learning value of redrafting including corrections:

- It [redrafting] helped because I had to rewrite the whole thing with the right words in the right place [...] you see it the way it should be.
- It helped to see my work as the best it can be.
- It forces me to reread and rewrite, which helps my memory.
- It gave me time to sit down and go through each error individually.

## **4.3 Student perceptions of their ability to retain correction, self-correct and notice errors**

Questions three and four aim to find out whether students thought that their ability to retain correction, self-correct and notice errors had benefited from this reflective approach to text correction. In the final survey students were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how often they could remember corrections and how often they could notice and self-edit errors in specific language areas. The five frequency indicators were: always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never; and the language areas identified were: noun form, verb form, spelling, sentence structure and vocabulary.

With regard to question three, when asked how frequently they could remember corrections made in their writing, many students chose the "usually" category for all grammar areas, very few selected "rarely" (4% for spelling and 12% for sentence structure) and none chose "never". When considering the percentage of students who selected "always" and "usually" together (Table 3), noun form and spelling seem to be the areas of correction that students felt they could remember most frequently; followed by sentence structure, verb form and vocabulary choice.

**Table 3: Student perceptions of how frequently they recollected corrections**

<i>Of the corrections your teacher indicates in your writing, how often do you remember those in:</i>	<i>Language areas</i>	<i>Percentage of students who selected “always” and “usually”</i>	<i>Percentage of students who selected “rarely”</i>
	Noun Form	77%	-
	Spelling	77%	4%
	Sentence Structure	69%	12%
	Verb Form	65%	-
	Vocabulary Choice	54%	-

As far as question four is concerned, when asked whether they felt able to self-correct errors, few students selected “always” in any language area apart from spelling (31%) and a small number selected “rarely” in respect to vocabulary (23%) and syntax (19%). The “always” and “usually” categories combined (Table 4), while showing that the majority of students felt they could tackle errors in spelling, noun and verb form by themselves, confirm that most did not feel confident with syntax and vocabulary.

**Table 4: Student perceptions of their ability to self-correct errors**

<i>Do you think you are able to self-correct errors in:</i>	<i>Language areas</i>	<i>Percentage of students who selected “always” and “usually”</i>	<i>Percentage of students who selected “rarely”</i>
	Spelling	88%	-
	Noun Form	73%	4%
	Verb Form	58%	8%
	Sentence Structure	35%	19%
	Vocabulary Choice	31%	23%

Students’ responses regarding their ability to notice errors in their writing further attest to learner uncertainty in dealing with vocabulary and sentence structure. Not only are these the areas that they clearly found most difficult to tackle, but it is also apparent that, generally, they lacked confidence in their ability to detect their language problems without some teacher guidance. Nobody, in fact, chose the “always” category and quite a few selected “rarely” (Table 5). This result, while showing students’ uncertainty about their ability to identify their own errors, helps to explain why they completely rejected indirect feedback without codes in their selection of preferred and useful correction method.

**Table 5: Student perceptions of their ability to notice errors**

<i>How often do you think you notice errors relating to:</i>	<i>Language areas</i>	<i>Percentage of students who selected “usually”</i>	<i>Percentage of students who selected “rarely”</i>
	Spelling	50%	8%
	Verb Form	42%	4%
	Noun Form	38%	8%
	Sentence Structure	35%	31%
	Vocabulary Choice	19%	31%

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of student responses suggests that students valued and profited from the opportunity to take up a more reflective role in their writing. The data shows that once they had been exposed to indirect feedback students appreciated its beneficial effect on their learning, even though they seemed reluctant to surrender their reliance on direct feedback. They considered direct feedback to be more helpful when revising syntax and vocabulary, whereas they felt that indirect feedback was useful in encouraging them to reflect on aspects of their writing and to develop improvements.

A major finding of this study therefore, is that different types of errors might require different teacher interventions. Student difficulty with self-correcting syntactic and lexical errors highlights the fact that some errors are regarded as less “treatable” than others. As reported in some of the literature, errors in sentence structure and vocabulary are considered “untreatable” in the sense that there is no handbook or set of rules students can consult to fix them; they have to rely on their acquired knowledge of the language (Ferris 1999). Where language knowledge has not yet been acquired, the provision of more, direct guidance is necessary in correcting these types of errors.

However, students felt that a reflective approach to correction helped them to retain and attend to written grammar correction, including those grammar areas they found particularly difficult to deal with by themselves. Their comments also indicate that over the semester they perceived improvement in their ability to write accurately and expressively, with particular emphasis on their use of sentence structure and vocabulary. It would be interesting to consider to what extent the autobiographical nature of their writing made students more concerned with using appropriate vocabulary to effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings.

Students’ responses highlighted the importance of learners actively doing something with the error correction they receive. The writing of further drafts incorporating feedback is viewed as a useful learning task, which encourages a deeper understanding of one’s own errors and, at the same time, gives a sense of accomplishment by making one’s autobiography as accurate as possible. Their remarks on redrafting show that they need to be given the opportunity to experiment with new learning strategies to appreciate their usefulness. Having redrafting included in the course assessment has encouraged them to “find the time” to try it out and understand its learning value. In a FL learning context, where the target language is just one subject to be studied among others, and not the vehicle for studying other subjects or for immediate communication outside the academic setting (as is the case for SL learning), students need to be strongly encouraged to realize that learning strategies, which at first might seem rather time consuming, are a fruitful investment in their long-term language learning.

Finally, some student observations also revealed a more mature attitude to correction – where marks and one’s own learning outcomes do not coincide and where marks received are not seen as main indicators for learning, as exemplified by this comment: “Self-correction is a good learning tool for me, even though my mark has not improved I feel as though I have learned grammar forms better.”

This correction model was trialled in a second-year course for one semester only. The analysis undertaken through the study suggests that being exposed to indirect feedback in the context of a reflective approach to text correction can be beneficial for intermediate FL students. Students are encouraged to consider text correction as a genuine source of learning and a process of improving; they are stimulated to become

more active in the correction of their texts; and they are provided with opportunities to reflect on their language output and on their writing process.

Although students' overall reaction to this experience seems positive it is acknowledged that mastering language learning strategies is an ongoing process which takes much longer than one semester to develop. Indirect feedback has now been introduced in first-year Italian courses, to start promoting in the early stages of language learning a more interactive response to teacher correction and a more reflective problem-solving attitude to self-correction.

Additionally, in revising the model for *Written Italian* two main factors are being considered. Given students' comments about the difficulty of self-correcting vocabulary and syntax errors, methods to raise and enhance student awareness of Italian syntactic structures are being investigated. Specifically, the collection of autobiographies generated by the students is being examined to find recurring syntactic and vocabulary problems in order to aid the development of appropriate learning activities. Finally, some students commented that not only did they feel that they had developed aspects of their writing throughout the course, but that they had also experienced some profound moments of personal reflection brought on by the writing experience itself. A deeper understanding of the role that autobiographical writing can play in combining student reflection on language with reflection on life is required to fully assess its impact on writing motivation, and thus further refine the teaching model.

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