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articoli

The utility of written corrective feedback in L2 learning: analysis of an experience with Erasmus incoming students

L'utilità del feedback correttivo scritto nell'apprendimento di L2: analisi di un'esperienza con studenti Erasmus

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Abstract

Leaving aside the problem of positive reinforcement, the only problem of the choice and use of corrective feedback is a subject of critical importance for L2 (second language) learning in a constructivist/interactionist perspective. The problem interfaces with the increasingly widespread use of information technology applied to language learning (Intelligent Tutoring System and Computer Assisted Language Learning technologies). Against the background of this complex scenario, the article aims to evaluate the effectiveness of peer-delivered corrective feedback in an intervention carried out with Erasmus students who learn the Italian language. Three different ways of providing written feedback are compared: (i) the direct substitution mode; (ii) the indirect feedback mode using metalinguistic codes; (iii) the indirect feedback mode using codes plus concrete examples. In line with the literature, the experiment results demonstrate that the forms of indirect feedback (conditions ii) and iii)) guarantee better long-term learning than direct feedback (condition i)). However, the advantage of integrating examples into indirect feedback is not clear.

Keywords: corrective feedback; L2 learning; written composition; indirect feedback; metalinguistic cues.

Sintesi

Lasciando da parte il problema del rinforzo positivo, il solo problema della scelta e dell'uso del feedback correttivo è un argomento di fondamentale importanza per l'apprendimento L2 in una prospettiva costruttivistica/interazionista. Il problema si interfaccia con l'uso sempre più diffuso della tecnologia informatica applicata all'apprendimento delle lingue (tecnologie Intelligent Tutoring System e Computer Assisted Language Learning). Sullo sfondo di questo scenario complesso, l'articolo mira a valutare l'efficacia del feedback correttivo in un intervento condotto con studenti Erasmus che apprendono la lingua italiana. Vengono confrontati tre diversi tipi di peer feedback applicati a una composizione scritta: (i) feedback diretto; (ii) feedback indiretto, utilizzando informazioni metalinguistiche; (iii) feedback indiretto, utilizzando informazioni metalinguistiche più esempi concreti. In linea con la letteratura, i risultati dimostrano che le forme di feedback indiretto (condizioni ii) e iii)) offrono un migliore apprendimento a lungo termine rispetto al feedback diretto condizione i)). Non risulta tuttavia chiaro il vantaggio apportato dall'integrazione nel feedback indiretto di esempi.

Parole chiave: feedback correttivo; apprendimento di L2; composizione scritta; feedback indiretto; indicazioni metalinguistiche.

1. Introduction

The problem of acquiring a foreign language is complicated by the co-presence in linguistic knowledge of two different levels: on the one hand, the knowledge of rules, on the other, the ability to use them correctly. Whereas the declarative knowledge of rules can be transmitted, the possibility of applying them correctly presupposes a set of complex skills that are difficult to acquire without adequate practice. In a constructivist perspective, this objective can be pursued: (i) by setting up varied learning environments that offer sufficient affordances for the learner's autonomous practice, and (ii) by intervening when necessary with adequate forms of corrective feedback on output.

The need of adequate learning environments is particularly strong when dealing with incoming Erasmus students' language training. Since trainees are adult students with high-level linguistic needs, proposed activities must be highly realistic and feedback must be built to meet motivated adult learners' autonomy expectations. In this sense, among the various proposals, written compositions are particularly indicated. Having an open-ended structure and being devoid of an explicit focus on grammar, they offer ample opportunities for output production which in turn helps students develop a greater sense of autonomy. Consequently, the problem arises of choosing effective, high-motivating forms of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF), in line with task specificity and with the learners' attitudes.

In the present research, the topic of the choice of adequate forms of feedback in the teaching of L2 will be addressed for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (par. 2), and in the specific case of written compositions (par. 3). The discussion will be preliminary to the presentation of an *in vivo* research which involved incoming Erasmus students (par. 4).

2. Corrective feedback in L2 learning

Errors in learning a foreign language are a fundamental part of the process. They reflect the development of inter-language systems in which over-generalizations of the rules learned as well as improper transfers of rules from L1 to L2 are present (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Corrective feedback (CF) is an indication given to learners that the use of the target language is incorrect and that transitory grammar rules must be modified accordingly.

The problem of the most suitable forms of corrective feedback in L2 learning has been extensively studied within the interactionist paradigm based on which the learning of a second language involves its situatedness in a social context (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Firth & Wanger, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1990;). According to the interactionist view, the social aspect of learning implies that learning takes place with the co-participation of all agents involved. It is precisely this assumption that directs the attentional resources of the learners towards the different forms of corrective feedback provided, allowing its reception and subsequent processing. On the other hand, the same circumstance whereby teachers locate corrective feedback in meaningful communicative contexts generally conflict with grammar teaching purposes as teachers provide a formal correction where students are expecting a comment on the content of their response. Precisely because of this unavoidable difficulty not all forms of feedback prove to be equally effective in stimulating the right amount of attention, forcing to carefully choose the CF types as well as the most effective delivery methods.

In effect, the term feedback has been interpreted differently in various contexts. James (1998) believes the term should be used only in the sense of an intervention that informs students that there is an error in their understanding/production tasks without providing a description. In contrast to this restrictive meaning, many scholars in SLA (Doughty, 2001; Ellis, 1997; Gregg, 2001; Spada & Lightbown, 1993) as well as many Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technology specialists (Cowan, Choi, & Kim, 2003; Heift & Schulze, 2003; Kreindler, 1998; Warschauer & Headley, 1998) extend the value of the term to include different types of information provided on the error made. CF is often divided into form and content. Form subsumes grammatical and usage errors and, just in terms of grammar, the options provided are various. In particular, direct, indirect and metalinguistic feedback are distinguished with further articulations within each category.

Direct feedback is the traditional form of feedback by which the requested correction is indicated by deletion, replacement, or insertion (e.g. "No, you should say goes, not go") (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ellis, 2009; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen, 2007). Reporting is more often explicit as in the example, but there are also implicit forms, which are also widely used, such as recast, a form of response apparently oriented on the meaning that in fact reformulates all or part of the expression used (e.g. "Yes, he goes to school every day") (Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1997). Direct feedback is fast and easy for both the teacher and the student. The teacher does not need to give supplementary explanation to the requested change and the student in turn does not need to consider the explanation or term used by the teacher to identify the error and if he copies the correction directly into the revision, he gets it right almost all times (Chandler, 2003). On the other hand, direct feedback has the disadvantage of requiring the L2 student only minimal processing so that the new information may not reach long-term memory (Ellis, 2009). According to Gordon (1994) the information delivered by direct feedback must be seen as a *performance support system* in that it supports the student in performing the correction task rather than teaching the student how to do it by processing the error.

Indirect feedback involves indicating that an error has been made without directly providing the correction (Bitchener et al., 2005; Ellis, 2009). This can take various forms, including underlining, circling, highlighting. Frequently, it involves a meta-linguistic hint which brings attention on general rules and which is thought as a means to provide information that learners can actively use in modifying their behavior ("Don't forget to make the verb agree with the subject") (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Metalinguistic corrective feedback involves providing learners with some form of explicit comment describing the learner's error (Ellis, 2009). It can take on multiple forms especially if delivered in written form (WCF), as the use of error codes correlating to a chart that indicates the nature of the error (e.g. VT for a verb tense (time) error; see Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013) for the complete error code chart), or as the use of questions and requests, which give way to negotiation of form (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Bitchener and Knoch (2010b) suggested as a possible metalinguistic comment the teacher providing the appropriate grammar rule and perhaps examples of the correct usage. It is noteworthy that giving examples to work on along with metalinguistic indications on usages is in line with the constructivist approach to L2 learning called Task Based Learning (TBL), according to which after an as wide as possible exposure to the language, in group or individually, the learner should not only reflect on the rules, but have the possibility to manipulate and experiment them spontaneously (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998; Willis & Willis, 2007).

Much experimental evidence in favor of indirect feedback and guidance moves (prompting, hinting, scaffolding, etc.) is obtained by analogy from procedural skills Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS) in areas such as algebra, physics or computer programming (Aleven & Koedinger, 2002; Anderson, Corbett, Koedinger, & Pelletier, 1995; Chi et al., 2001; Renkl, 2014; Schworm & Renkl, 2007; Wylie & Chi, 2014). In the specific field of studies on SLA, experimental research has demonstrated a slight advantage of indirect feedback on direct feedback. In this sense, Chandler (2003) found that L2 students reported feeling that when they received indirect WCF they learned more. With reference to the effectiveness of feedback, Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) showed that over time it was indirect WCF that helped the L2 students to make greater progress in accuracy. In a study on the relationship between error type and feedback type, Ferris (2006) observed that indirect feedback was used 59% of the time for *treatable* errors (e.g. verb tense, verb form, subject-verb agreement, articles, pronouns, spelling), whereas *untreatable* errors (e.g. word choice, idiom, sentence structure) received teacher direct feedback in 65% of the cases (see also Ferris, 2012). In a further study on the relationship among error type, feedback type, and effectiveness of feedback, Lyster and Ranta (1997) demonstrated that in L2 learning of French learners' *uptake* (i.e. the student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback) occurs 55% of the feedback utterances produced by the teacher while 27% led effectively to student repair. When examining data in more detail, explicit corrections and recast (direct feedback) led to limited uptake but to a high degree of correctness in reformulations, while indirect feedback brought about a high level of uptake but a lower level of accuracy in response. Among different kinds of indirect feedback (meta-linguistic cues; clarification-requests, and repetitions) however, meta-linguistic cues were found to be the most successful at eliciting repair. This result is corroborated by the results of Lyster (1998) in which *negotiation of form* (i.e. various kinds of indirect feedback including metalinguistic cues) in French as L2 proved more effective at leading to successful student repair than direct feedback (recast and explicit correction).

In line, Ferreira (2006) conducted an empirical study based on the pre-test/post-test and control group design on effective feedback strategies for the teaching of languages (Spanish) in e-learning contexts. The goal was to provide information about effective feedback strategies for ITS for foreign language teaching. Two groups of corrective feedback strategies were investigated: Group 1 (repetition of error and explicit correction), and Group 2, fed with metalinguistic hints and elicitations from the response of the student (without giving the response). Results revealed that that the strategies of Group 2 (metalinguistic keys and prompts) supported better learning of the subjunctive in Spanish in intermediate and advanced level students than the strategies of Group 1 (error repetition and correction). Similarly, in Ferreira, Moore, and Mellish (2007) two general kinds of negative feedback strategies: (i) Giving-Answer Strategies (GAS), where the teacher directly gives the desired target form or indicates the location of the error, and (ii) Prompting-Answer Strategies (PAS), where the teacher pushes the student less directly to notice and repair their own error, were compared in the domain of Spanish classroom/tutorial teaching. The main finding is that, although GAS occur more frequently than PAS in both contexts, it is the PAS that are more effective, in terms of eliciting explicit repairs by the students.

The same advantages of active indirect forms of feedback are also found in ITS and CALL technologies for L2 learning, and especially in tutoring programs that provide for automatic correction of errors. Initially, these systems provided in response only simple error messages, using a *wrong-try-again* approach without information on the nature or learners' errors (Kreindler, 1998), or, alternatively, simple and pre-ordered forms of substitute

feedback, forcing to present students only multiple-choice tests and filling-in-the-gap exercises. Today, thanks to sophisticated Natural Language Processing (NPL) techniques, these systems are able to segment and analyze student responses. This allows on the one hand to present communicative tasks to learners, while providing more sophisticated forms of feedback such as bug reports based on the analysis of errors produced by each student along with specific metalinguistic keys as comments, information or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance (Criswell, Byrnes, & Pfister, 1991; Nagata, 1997; Sams, 1995). In this sense, the NPL approach represents the highest level of computer-based corrective feedback and allows for the largest flexibility of feedback forms allowing students to costruct their language knowledge in a very individualized way (Kreindler, 1998).

Therefore, although there is no agreement on a single best approach, there seems to be a consensus that simply providing the correct answer as feedback may not lead to deep learner processing or internalisation whether it is provided by the teacher or automatically. Indirect feedback requires a more active learner role, encouraging reflection and autonomous repair of the error.

3. Written composition feedback

Writing skills represent an important goal of the language curriculum. In many work environments good writing skills and multimodal literary practices are needed to gain success. Students need to achieve lexical and grammar correctness in writing, know different genres and styles, and apply appropriate language registers. Writing assignments are generally well accepted by language students because of the lack of an explicit focus on grammar. As a result, students produce more output, have more opportunity for practice and develop a greater sense of autonomy, feeling free to express their thoughts without bothering with grammar. However, just for this reason, holistic writing ability is frequently not accompanied by an increase in grammar accuracy and the tolerance level for errors fixed by students is rather high unless understanding is seriously compromised. As Kessler (2009) notes, in teaching literary skills there is a continuous trade-off in terms of the teacher's role as to whether encourage autonomy by not intervening, or to encourage accuracy by providing corrective feedback (see also Eola & Oskoz, 2010).

In the case of written compositions as opposed to oral utterances indirect feedback is generally less frequently used because the procedure of writing out the error terminology and providing relative explanations is particularly time consuming (Ellis, 2009). However, in advanced writing courses where students have already mastered key concepts for writing skills and are able to draw on their linguistic knowledge to attempt to correct the errors that have been identified, written feedback is used (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a). Some research data show indirect feedback advantage for written compositions too. For example, in Sheen (2007) the correct use of articles was taught via direct WCF and via metalinguistic WCF explanations showing that the group of L2 students who had received metalinguistic explanations performed better than the group that received direct error correction on delayed tests and both groups outperformed the control group (no feedback).

In particular, there are three forms of feedback studied in relation to written production: teacher, peer, or automated feedback. For each modality, indirect feedback is variously declinated. Generally, teachers insert meta-linguistic codes into each essay that indicate the

type of error made (Lalande, 1982). Students in fact expect to have errors on their composition marked and if the text is not corrected they may well assume that it is correct (AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014; Lee, 2015). The teacher's annotations generally refer to both form and content including style and organization. In turn, each code is interpreted by the student who is provided with rubrics or keys to understand the meaning of each mark so as to be enabled to make an autonomous revision. To help teachers in the marking process, various kinds of software tools have been developed such as word processor revision features and annotators. Word processors offer standard features which can help with providing electronic feedback, from font formatting to grammar checking to hyperlinks (Krajka, 2002), which can be available also as standalone programs and online applications (e.g. *LanguageTool* as a grammar, style and spell checker for more than 20 languages). If some functionalities in these electronic instruments (e.g font formatting) seem to naturally support a better provision of direct feedback, others, such as the creation of hyperlinks, go in the direction of expanding the possibilities of using indirect metalinguistic feedback through directing students to use language resources and database autonomously. Annotators are just online tools which save marked-up texts and create a searchable corpus of each student's productions, a feature that,when used to support the provision of active feedback, helps the teacher to be more consistent and systematic in the marking process by taking the student's error history into account (Hamel, Slavkov, Inkpen, & Xiao, 2016; Krajka, 2002; Stenetorp et al., 2012; Yeh & Lo, 2009). Learner corpora can be used to analyse L2 writing, to uncover negative writing practices, and to provide examples. In Siyanova-Chanturia (2015) for example, a learner corpus of texts written by Chinese learners of Italian is shown to be important for learning the collocation rule. Similarly, Strobl (2017) used a corpus of Belgian learners' texts in German to improve the use of cohesion devices.

In recent years, peer feedback and electronically delivered peer feedback have been extensively studied for written composition. Peer feedback provides more social support than teacher's feedback, with learners finding it less threatening and more motivating than the teacher's publicly given feedback, although on the surface, the purpose and structure may appear to be the same. Thanks to peer feedback students develop a sense of audience and text ownership taking their role seriously and activating deeper potential reflection on language (Lee, 2015). Research has examined the effectiveness of peer feedback as well as its impact on motivation and cooperation in different contexts. In her meta-analysis on peer feedback Chen (2016) found that electronic feedback is perceived by students as more comfortable than the face-to-face modality and in many cases as more focused and informative. The main modality in which electronic peer feedback can be delivered is as a separate assignment using alternatively a management system (e.g. Moodle), a sharing file hosting web service (e.g. Dropbox), or an extended word processor (with comment or review functions). Especially word processor functions have been shown to be effective in peer electronically delivered feedback because of the possibility of punctually comparing the original text with insights and metalinguistic hints (AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014). Even though there are advantages to peer electronically delivered feedback, shortcomings still exist. Online peer feedback reduces immediate interactions, so that sometimes one-way communication may create misunderstandings because without the use of facial expressions, students may miss explicit references that could be made obvious using indexical devices. A related possibility of peer electronically delivered feedback is anonimity. Online feedback with anonymity means that students post their essays without using their real name on sites such as Dropbox, so that their classmates can provide feedback in anonymous environments. Online peer feedback has the advantages of giving

students more confidence to present more critical comments and, on the part of the writers, of not feeling to be evaluated whereas it presents the same disadvantages of electronically delivered feedback (Guardado & Shi, 2007).

The other modality is in the form of collaborative writing carried out in the forms of Google Docs, wikis (Wikipedia entrances), digital story-telling, etc. In general, collaborative writing is considered a highly motivating task as it is perceived as a real, not fictitious activity (King, 2015; Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015). For example, in wiki writing students writing together have been shown to pay great attention to metalinguist/content comments and suggestions they receive by peers (Oskoz & Elola, 2011). In the process of collaborative writing, especially when working in pairs, peers can brainstorm, discuss how to use the language more accurately and offer immediate feedback so that students' work may be better than it would be if individually carried out (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012).

The characteristics of indirect active feedback to be provided through peer feedback must be specified a priori through appropriate training. Teachers not only need to explain their requirements to students when they administer peer feedback, but also specify their roles in peer feedback activities. Furthermore, teachers need to assist students to process peer feedback (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012; Zhu, 2001). This preparation is also required because unlike the feedback given by teachers this type of feedback is more often inaccurate and unhelpful (Tai, Lin, & Yang, 2015; Yu & Lee, 2016). Furthermore, in many circumstances students may favour their peers through avoiding criticism of their work (Carson & Nelson, 1996).

Another approach to evaluating student writing is Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) which consists in a number of programs designed to provide assessment of formal writing especially in the English language. These programs have grown out of automated essay correction software developed in the Sixties with the aim of reducing costs of assessment rather than providing specific feedback for improving writing (Warschauer & Ware, 2006). Within AWE systems feedback is generally given not on free compositions but in response to fixed essay prompts. According to Cotos (2011) research results on the use of AWE programs are mixed, with many users discontent with receiving feedback which is considered too static and repetitive. Although progressively these feedback systems have incorporated more active features to enhance writing accuracy such as reference handbooks, templates, word editors, some behavioral studies indicate that their use seems to be best suited to provide preliminary feedback in the initial drafts of the writing process with the need of teacher intervention in later stages (Bestgen, 2017; Li, Dursun, & Hegelheimer, 2017), and at lower stages of language competence for grammar checking (Li, Hui-Hsien, & Saricaoglu, 2017). Instead, where used as writing coaches totally autonomously these systems have been considered frustrating (Chen & Cheng, 2008).

The analysis of the different forms of WCF shows the importance of corrections which are able to encourage reflection on the error both in circumstances where feedback is provided by teacher/peers, and where it is dispensed automatically. In particular, the different forms of indirect peer feedback provided in the traditional form of the ex-post correction or in the ex-ante condition (close to collaborative learning) appear particularly indicated because, from a motivational point of view, they are perceived by students as less invasive than the feedback provided by teachers, and more stimulating than automatic feedback, although the importance of a right mix in feedback delivery modalities must be taken into account.

4. Peer-delivered written feedback: analysis of an experience

In this preliminary *in vivo* experiment, three different modalities of feedback will be compared for the task of producing an essay-style written composition as part of an Italian course for incoming Erasmus students provided by the University of Trieste Linguistic Center (CLA) in the academic year 2015-2016.

Erasmus incoming students receive language training aimed at the best attendance of university lessons. After taking a placement test to establish the level of the Italian language knowledge, students are included in one of the courses provided (A2 beginners; B1 intermediate; B2 advanced). There is no course for absolute beginners as Erasmus students are supposed to have already acquired the basic knowledge of the Italian language before the beginning of the period abroad. Each course has a duration of 60 hours with training credits based on the number of hours actually attended. Especially in the humanities area, the credits obtained can be used in partial fulfilment of courses attendance. For the teaching of Italian an active methodology is adopted in line with modern constructivist principles. Teaching takes place in praesentia through lectures alternated with collaborative work. To support lectures, students have access to IT tools, such as the *Tandem Learning at CLA* program to communicate via e-mail and in chat with native speakers, and the online language course *Rosetta Stone* which offers L2 learning opportunities according to the functionalist methodology.

In teaching programs, Italian composition writing (free and prompted) is largely used. This activity is particularly important for the linguistic preparation of students frequently called to produce term papers and essays reports for the achievement of course credits. Learners are generally strongly motivated feeling free to express their thoughts into most congenial forms. In such defined contexts, for a correct definition of the learners' action space, feedback is necessary although it is difficult to provide because, contrary to usual production exercises that include sentence completion or translation, errors are not predictable a priori.

The essay production concluded a two-week work of reading, understanding and discussion of articles appeared in Italian local and national newspapers concerning climate change, carried out in class and through home assignments. In particular, the written composition task consisted in asking students to list the main causes of climate change in five points, reporting at least one consequence for each cause. The length of the essays should not exceed 2000 characters. The time given for the test was 30 minutes. The use of a dictionary and other online/offline resources was not permitted. The test, which required writing the essay on an open source word-processor, took place in the audiovisual classroom at the CLA as part of a normal Italian lesson. At the end of the test the students filed their essays on Dropbox.

The study involved 24 university students in Italy for about a month enrolled in Italian language courses organized by the University of Trieste, who came respectively from: Greece (8), Albania (4), Croatia (5), France (1); Slovenia (3); Spain (3). All students were enrolled in level B1 course. The aim of the experiment was to compare the effects of three WCF types on second draft essay corrections. The students were divided into three groups of eight students each. They were told that their essays would be corrected by an Italian peer anonymously and that they had to modify their texts based on their indications. The choice of peer anonymously delivered feedback was made to guarantee the students' maximum commitment. In order to facilitate comparability of evidence, WCF was focused on a single grammatical problem, i.e. the use of articles. For each group, feedback was delivered by a peer Italian undergraduate Letters student. The three Italian students were

recruited on a voluntary basis and appropriately trained for CF delivery. During a one-hour meeting, they were taught to provide: (i) article deletion, replacement, or insertion (Group A); (ii) metalinguistic indications (general rule recall) without directly suggesting the correct article (Group B); (iii) rule recall plus some examples (max. three) to facilitate error correction (Group C). The texts delivered to Dropbox were picked up and corrected by peers using the word processor Comment function. The provided comments were discussed and revised collaboratively by the three students before being re-filed on Dropbox. After receiving the feedback, the students proceeded to the second draft. The time allowed was 15 minutes. The texts were submitted to evaluation for uptake (number of corrections made) and correctness of the responses. The test results were subsequently commented on by the teacher in class, maintaining the anonymity of the individual tests. After one week, all the students undertook a 12-item fill-in exercise on Italian articles use. The completion test was equally submitted to evaluation.

	Uptake 1st draft	Corrections 2nd draft	12-item Completion Test
A	93.00%	95.00%	46.00%
B	92.00%	65.00%	73.00%
C	94.00%	80.00%	70.00%

Figure 1. Percentages of Uptake, 2nd draft corrections and Completion test correct responses in Groups.

The results, presented at a qualitative level in Figure 1, indicate that the uptake percentages are comparable in the three conditions (respectively, 93% (Group A); 92% (Group B); 94% (Group C)) (see Appendix 1 for individual student scores). This means that regardless of its content, feedback has led to generalized attempts to amend errors. At least in part, the high level of uptake may be due to the low number of errors on articles made in the compositions (number of errors x composition: ≤10; Mean: 6.5) In this regard, it was observed that the essays with higher number of errors (6 to 10) had a slightly lower uptake, probably due to distraction. With regard to the effects of the feedback provided on 2nd drafts, the students who received the rule recall plus examples (Group C) had slightly better performances than the students who received only metalinguistic information (Group B) and that the group who received direct feedback (Group A) outperformed the other two (respectively, 95% (Group A); 65% (Group B); 80% (Group C). The results are in line with the expectations based on research data. The Group A students only had to insert the right responses in their 2nd drafts while the students of Group B had to correct the errors through reflection on the rule. The students of Group C were in an intermediate position since they had to base their responses on reflection on the rule but also on ready-made examples to adapt analogically to the specific errors.

In the Completion exercise the results of Groups B and C, similar to each other, were clearly superior to those of Group A (respectively, 46% (Group A); 73% (Group B); 70% (Group C)). The results are in line with the data present in literature. Direct feedback means that the corrections are made mechanically, which does not imply stable learning. On the contrary, indirect feedback leads to lower immediate results, but proves to be able to stimulate reflection and long-term learning. However, the experiment did not clarify whether the use of examples in addition to metalinguistic information is advantageous. In fact, examples led to more successful corrections in 2nd drafts (80% vs. 65%), but a comparable advantage was not detected in the fill-in exercise (70% vs. 73%).

7. Conclusion

In the observational study conducted with Erasmus students learning Italian for academic purposes, empirical evidence was explored concerning the effectiveness of indirect feedback strategies in written composition tasks. The re-proposal of the research on an experimental basis will require a larger number of students involved, possibly controlled by mother tongue, and the adoption of a pre-/post-test experimental design. It is important to examine right now, however, the significance of the evidence obtained so far in the light of the literature.

Unlike oral production, in written composition tasks the use of indirect feedback is not frequent. This happens for several reasons. Written composition tasks are generally accomplished independently by the individual student and as such they do not naturally offer opportunities for negotiating form/meaning mistakes. In addition, in the teaching practice, written production is often associated with language tests, for which the writing process is not so important to evaluate as it is to assess its final outcome. It should also be remembered that written compositions involve a wide range of possible mistakes which are not easy to negotiate. However, since indirect feedback applied to written compositions allows to obtain positive results in terms of motivation and learning results (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ellis, 2009; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), its use deserves careful consideration. In the proposed experiment, the ex-post form of indirect feedback was adopted along with the anonymous peer-delivered mode. As emerges from the literature (AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014; Chen, 2016), these conditions guarantee a high level of compliance since learner motivation increases in a context of empowerment and autonomy. In line with these premises, in the present experiment a high level of uptake was registered for all conditions. The use of anonymous peer feedback turned out to be a valid feedback modality, which motivated the students to respond appropriately, as emerges also from some informal comments collected at the end of the test.

Equally important to examine is the relation between indirect feedback and its effects on learning. For written compositions there is a wide range of interventions available aimed at signaling mistakes. Some forms of feedback inform the student that an error was made and then simply give the location of the error in the sentence (James, 1998). Most forms of feedback, however, provide additional information about the nature of the error (Doughty, 2001; Spada & Lightbown, 1993). In this sense, prompting, hinting, repetitions and scaffolding are often supplemented by the indication of the category of error and, possibly, the use of examples to illustrate the rule (Ferreira et al., 2007; Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015; Strobl, 2017). The use of examples allows to solve linguistic problems by exploiting analogical thinking, a modality of bottom-up thinking alternative to the use of rules, which triggers top-down reasoning processes. The experiment results confirmed that the use of the rule-plus-examples mode increased the likelihood of feedback being noticed and processed by students. However, the fact that there was not a clear advantage of condition C (rule plus examples) over condition B (rule only) deserves further consideration.

In particular, some alternative ways to provide supporting examples should be explored in the future. First, it could be evaluated to include examples in a *negotiation of form* format (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b; Lyster, 1998). This feedback mode provides learners with timely opportunities to make important form-function links in the target language. Although mainly adopted for oral interactions, negotiation-of-form could be adapted to written compositions too, by providing a short (distance) conference with the assigned Italian peer. As Bitchener and Knoch (2010b) observe, providing an oral student-peer 5-minute individual conference to integrate written metalinguistic feedback may be a useful

tool to enhance awareness for various types of errors in written composition tasks. Another possibility to increase the overall effect of examples on long-term learning could be to include examples from learner corpora. One of the ways to build feedback options, in fact, is to draw on examples from collected learner language corpora (Siyanova-Chanturia, 2015; Strobl, 2017). Learner corpora are used to analyze L2 writing, to uncover both positive and negative writing practices, and to provide correlating examples which, unlike the examples used in the present experiment to illustrate the rule, could better support reflection and deep learning as they are linked to the individual student's personal inventory of past mistakes.

Appendix 1

Subjects	Errors 1st draft	Uptake	Corrections 2nd draft	Correct responses 12-item Completion test
1	5	5 (100%)	5 (100%)	7 (58%)
2	6	6 (100%)	6 (100%)	8 (67%)
3	7	7 (100%)	7 (100%)	5 (42%)
4	4	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	8 (67%)
5	8	6 (75%)	5 (83%)	4 (33%)
6	7	7 (100%)	7 (100%)	5 (42%)
7	9	8 (88%)	7 (87%)	4 (33%)
8	10	8 (80%)	7 (87%)	3 (25%)

Figure 2. Percentages of Uptake, 2nd draft corrections and Completion test correct responses in Group A.

Subjects	Errors 1st draft	Uptake	Corrections 2nd draft	Correct responses 12-item Completion test
1	4	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	9 (75%)
2	7	7(100%)	6 (86%)	10 (83%)
3	8	6 (85%)	3 (50%)	9 (75%)
4	4	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	10 (83%)
5	7	6 (86%)	4 (67%)	9 (75%)
6	7	7 (100%)	4 (57%)	8 (67%)
7	8	7 (87%)	5 (71%)	8 (67%)
8	11	9 (82%)	6 (67%)	7 (58%)

Figure 3. Percentages of Uptake, 2nd draft corrections and Completion test correct responses in Group B.

Subjects	Errors 1st draft	Uptake	Corrections 2nd draft	Correct responses 12-item Completion test
1	4	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	8 (67%)
2	5	5 (100%)	4 (80%)	10 (83%)

3	7	7 (100%)	6 (86%)	7 (58%)
4	5	5 (100%)	4 (80%)	8 (67%)
5	8	7 (87%)	5 (71%)	7 (58%)
6	8	8 (100%)	6 (75%)	9 (75%)
7	9	8 (89%)	7 (87%)	8 (67%)
8	10	8 (80%)	7 (87%)	10 (83%)

Figure 4. Percentages of Uptake, 2nd draft corrections and Completion test correct responses in Group C.

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