

# Reformulation and Self-correction: Insights into correction strategies for EFL writing in a school context. —————

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## Abstract

This study compares the effectiveness and classroom appropriateness of two correction strategies (*reformulation* and *self-correction*) for EFL writing with a school group of 16 Spanish learners of English. The study examines the reduction of errors in students' drafts through a writing-correction-rewriting task which includes: (i) a reformulation session in which learners received feedback in the form of a reformulated text and (ii) a self-correction session in which learners received no feedback. In both sessions students worked in pairs and had to report and explain their proposed corrections. Results show that whereas reformulation outperformed self-correction as regards error detection, both strategies had a positive effect on error reduction of those errors which had been previously reported. Also, learners failed to report errors beyond sentence level with both strategies. As regards classroom appropriateness, neither reformulation nor self-correction seemed fully successful and some variations to adapt them to regular teaching praxis are suggested.

**Keywords:** self-correction, reformulation, EFL writing, error correction, feedback.

## Resumen

Este estudio compara dos estrategias de corrección de redacciones en inglés con un grupo de 16 adolescentes españoles en contexto escolar. El estudio analiza la detección y reducción de errores a lo largo de una tarea de redacción, corrección y repetición de la redacción. Esta tarea incluye dos sesiones en las que los alumnos, en parejas, deben encontrar, corregir y explicar los errores de sus redacciones. En una de las sesiones, sesión de reformulación, con la ayuda de una versión reformulada de su redacción y en la otra sesión, sesión de autocorrección, sin ninguna ayuda. Los resultados muestran que la reformulación ayuda a detectar un mayor número de errores pero que con ambas estrategias se corrigen correctamente la mayoría de errores detectados. Por otra parte, los alumnos no encontraron ningún error a nivel textual. Finalmente, el trabajo sugiere adaptaciones para utilizar estas estrategias en el aula.

**Palabras clave:** autocorrección, reformulación, corrección de redacciones, inglés lengua extranjera, retroalimentación.

## 1. Introduction

The effectiveness of corrective feedback (henceforth CF) on learners' written texts has been widely researched over the past 20 years (see reviews in Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 2007). Truscott's (1996) review article arguing that grammar correction in writing classes is useless and should be abandoned and the subsequent theoretical counterargument by Ferris (1999) spawned a great deal of empirical studies debating the effectiveness of CF. However, as Bitchener (2008) points out, only few studies have included control groups in order to test the efficacy of CF in a reliable manner. According to Ferris (2004) this is due to ethical concerns, as most teachers would feel reluctant to withhold CF from some students simply for research purposes. As a consequence, the debate has often diverted its focus away from the (in)effectiveness of CF to the relative effectiveness of different types of CF.

The literature debate highlights the great pedagogical importance of this topic. CF on second language learners' writing is an issue of concern not only for second language researchers but also for language teachers, as Adams (2003) points out. With this concern in mind and in order to further explore the efficacy of CF and to bridge the gap between researchers and classroom teachers, the purpose of the present study is to compare the effectiveness of two correction strategies, reformulation and self-correction, through a writing-peer correction-rewriting cycle within authentic classroom conditions.

In order to ensure a more ecologically valid study, we have preserved the classroom focus. The participants were 16 Spanish adolescents learning English in high school. They belonged to an intact classroom where both strategies were integrated as part of their regular English lessons. Their teacher was the only person in charge of the whole process and only materials available in the classroom were used.

As for the two strategies, reformulation provides learners with feedback in the form of a reformulated text, that is, a re-written version of the learner's original text. In contrast, self-correction provides learners with no feedback at all. Thus, the study compares a specific type of feedback (reformulation) vs. a no-feedback condition (self-correction) and aims to contribute, not only to the great bulk of research on reformulation, but also to the debate about the (in)effectiveness of error correction. Furthermore, as stated above, we also aim to test this effectiveness within the classroom

limitations, which will serve us to address the ecological validity of these strategies for regular classroom practice.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Reformulation and different types of feedback

As Sachs & Polio (2007) point out, even among those who assume that written feedback is helpful, the form that error correction should take remains a contentious issue. This debate has mainly revolved around the question of how explicit and how focused CF should be in order to help learners more effectively (Bitchener, 2008).

Reformulation is one possible form of CF for students' writings. It provides learners with feedback in the form of a re-written version of the learner's original text. This new version makes the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact (Thornbury, 1997). Reformulation has been researched both pedagogically (Cohen, 1989; Hedge, 1988; Thornbury, 1997) and empirically (Adams, 2003; Allwright, Woodley & Allwright, 1988; Cohen, 1982; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2002; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005) and its effectiveness has been widely recognized. However, the studies on reformulation have developed quite independently from the studies on different types of CF. In fact, studies on CF do not mention reformulation (cf. Bitchener and Knoch, 2009). Despite this, as reformulation is a type of CF, it can also be classified within the different types that have been identified in the literature.

Bitchener (2008) highlights two important and very explored distinctions in the CF literature: (i) focused/unfocused feedback and (ii) direct/indirect feedback. Focused feedback only targets specific errors or types of errors while unfocused feedback targets all (or almost all) the errors. Although reformulation has also been used to address specific grammar points (e.g. French pronominal verbs, see Lapkin, Swain & Smith, 2002; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005), when reformulating a text every error is transformed into a correct target language (TL) form. Therefore, the CF offered by means of reformulation can be classified as unfocused. On the other hand, reformulation can be said to offer both indirect and direct CF. Direct CF offers learners the correct target language form while indirect CF encourages learners to self-correct the errors by using different strategies, such as underlining or circling errors, recording the number of errors on a given line and using a code to show where the error has occurred and which type of error it is (Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008).

Those in favour of direct CF value this type of feedback because students and teachers prefer it (Ferris & Roberts, 2001) and also, on analogy with discussions of recasts in the oral feedback literature (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000), because direct corrections are less ambiguous than reformulations. As a matter of fact, reformulations can be perceived by the learner as alternative ways of expressing the same idea instead of being perceived as corrective (Lyster, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). On the contrary, those in favour of indirect CF emphasize that it involves students in a problem-solving task, a type of task which provokes cognitive conflict and might promote acquisition in the long-run (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ferris, 2002). This idea is totally in line with research on reformulation, which has been defined as a strategy that, by presenting information that contradicts students' beliefs, provokes cognitive conflict and enhances learning (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005). The reformulated text can, accordingly, be included as one more strategy for indirect CF. All in all, it must be noted that reformulation straddles the boundary between direct and indirect CF, since it provokes cognitive conflict but it does, in fact, offer a target like alternative just as direct feedback does. This means that with reformulation students might benefit from both the advantages of direct and clear feedback and the advantages of being presented with a cognitive conflict.

Cognitive conflict also has some limitations. Low-level students might fail to understand the indirect corrections on their own and, accordingly, be more successful when the correct form is directly provided (Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Likewise, the value of the cognitive effort must be weighed up against the delay in reaching firm conclusions about the errors and their corrections (Chandler, 2003). Finally, indirect CF might only help to gain control of certain types of errors, namely linguistic forms that have already been partially internalised. On the contrary, this type of CF might be of no use for new forms that students have not started to acquire yet (Ellis et al., 2008). These limitations can be encapsulated in the *sine qua non* condition for cognitive conflict to be effective which has been formulated in research about reformulation: students must have the reasoning abilities and/or previous knowledge to resolve the conflict (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005).

Obviously, resolvability depends on many factors, such as learners' proficiencies, educational backgrounds, readiness or training to engage in and benefit from this kind of learning experience, etc. Neither reformulation nor other types of feedback have a monopoly on provoking cognitive conflict. A direct correction offering the correct form can also provoke this conflict if the learner tries to work out why the correction has been made. Similarly, students might find the differences between their original text and the reformulated one without giving it much thought. In other words, it is necessary to distinguish the influence of the type of CF per se and the influence of other constructs coming into play depending on how the CF is implemented.

## **2.2. The influence of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) constructs on CF**

As stated above, studies on reformulation and studies on CF have developed in two separate strands of research. While work on CF has developed a field of its own, reformulation has been explored within the field of cognitive interactionist approaches to SLA. The reason is that reformulation usually implies relevant constructs in SLA, such as dialogic interaction, negotiation of meaning/form, language related episodes, etc. These cognitive activities allow researchers to indirectly get insights into learners' thoughts but they have also revealed compelling connections to learning. In this study, both strategies, reformulation and self-correction, are operationalized in a way that integrates some of these activities, namely, written output, peer dialogue and linguistic explanations. The following subsections are devoted to summarize the main findings regarding these constructs.

## **2.3. Written output**

The benefits of written output have been highlighted from the two fields of research involved in the present study. On the one hand, research on CF has emphasized that mere practice greatly benefits students (Chandler, 2003; Truscott, 2004). On the other hand, from the point of view of SLA theories, according to the output (Swain, 1985, 1993, 1995, 2005) and noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1995), output triggers noticing and noticing triggers learning.

The noticing hypothesis defends the position that some kind of attention to form is a *sine qua non* condition for learning (Ellis, 1995; Leow, 2000; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990, 1995 *inter alia*). Whether essential or not, researchers seem to agree that noticing plays a crucial role in subsequent processing of L2 data (Leow, 1997; Robinson, 1997; Rosa & Leow, 2004; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999). Among the elements likely to trigger off such noticing (see Gass (1997) for a discussion) output tasks and particularly written output tasks rank among the most successful (Izumi, 2002, 2003; Williams, 1999, 2001). If students receive CF on their writing, they can compare their production with the TL forms and are likely to "notice the gap" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986), that is, to notice the differences between those forms and their own production. Connecting this to reformulation and self-correction, research has demonstrated that reformulation facilitates noticing the gap while learners might fail to do so when no feedback is received, that is, with self-correction (Lee, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 2002; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005).

#### ***2.4. Peer discussion and linguistic explanations***

It is widely accepted that conversational interaction in a second language plays an important facilitative role in second language learning (Gass, 2003; Mackey, 1999, 2007; Mackey, Kanganas & Oliver, 2007; Pica, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2002 among others). Based on the Vygotskian idea that individual mental resources are developed through collective behaviour, Swain (2006) has further substantiated the role of collaborative dialogue, understood as a dialogue in which learners have to sort out linguistic problems together and, in doing so, they are at the same time co-constructing metalinguistic knowledge.

The effect of collaborative dialogue has been usually investigated by analysing learners' language related episodes, operationalized as interactions in which students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or self-correct their language production (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Linguistic explanations provide us with partial insights into learners' thoughts, but have also been claimed to push the learners towards a deeper level of attention to form than the mere noticing of forms to which we have made reference so far. Some authors (Leow, 1997; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999) have found that learners demonstrating a higher level of awareness performed significantly better than those with a lower level of awareness on both the recognition and written production of the targeted forms.

In conclusion, reformulation and self-correction, as operationalized here, integrate written output, peer dialogue and linguistic explanations, constructs that have been claimed to facilitate learning an L2. On the other hand, reformulation offers a type of feedback which pushes learners to notice the gap while self-correction offers no feedback at all.

### **3. Research Questions**

The present study considers one main research question: (i) Are reformulation and self-correction effective and equally effective on error correction of students' writings? Based on the literature review presented above, it can be initially hypothesized that both techniques will be effective on error reduction because they integrate several constructs (written output, peer dialogue, linguistic explanations) that facilitate learning. On the other hand, when comparing both techniques, it can be hypothesized that reformulation will be more effective because it provides feedback in the form of a reformulated text while self-correction offers no feedback.

In addition, we formulate a second research question whose aim is to make the shift from the learning processes to the teaching processes, that is, to test whether

these strategies could be integrated as regular teaching activities: (ii) Are both strategies appropriate for the classroom context?

These two questions are independent in the sense that the strategies can be intrinsically effective or ineffective on error correction regardless of whether they are applicable to the classroom; nevertheless, the combination of both factors (intrinsic success of the strategy and classroom appropriateness) will allow us to derive some pedagogical implications.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Participants

This study was carried out as part of the classroom activities of a group of sixteen 16/17-year-old Spanish students of English in their first year of non-compulsory Secondary Education (*Bachillerato*), the first course (of two) preparing students who wish to go to University. At the time of data collection the participants had been learning English for 444 hours, which means four school years and six months having three hours of English per week. According to internal school tests and following the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) their level was equated to an A2 level.

### 4.2. Procedure

Data were collected during four sessions over a period of 4 school weeks, having 1 session per week (every Friday) and each session lasting 55 minutes. The school teacher was the only person in charge of the whole process. The four sessions were distributed as follows:

Session 1-Writing (individual work): In this session the 16 students wrote a composition individually. Eight participants were asked to write a composition about a haunted house called Borley Rectory. Henceforth we will refer to this composition as narrative A. The remaining eight participants were asked to write a composition about a boy who travelled to Thailand and got involved in drug dealing. Henceforth we will refer to this composition as narrative B. To preserve classroom appropriateness, both narratives were selected from the students' textbook (Anderson, Woods & Páramo Gutiérrez, 2001) and had been recently read in class, that is, the students had to retell the stories they had previously read with their teacher. The original story about Borley Rectory had an extension of 360 words and the story about Thailand of 400 words.

The students wrote their narratives individually and they were not allowed to use the dictionary or the textbook nor were they allowed to ask questions to the teacher or to their partners. The extension of the students' narratives ranged from 89 to 173 words with a mean of 140 words. After session one, all the narratives were collected.

Session 2-Reformulation (pair-work): The 16 participants were divided into 8 pairs assigned by the teacher. Every pair consisted of a student who had written narrative A and a student who had written narrative B. Accordingly, we will now refer to the learners in every pair as the A student, when referring to the student who wrote narrative A, and the B student, when referring to the one who wrote narrative B.

In this session, every pair received narrative A as originally written by the A student in the pair. The original draft was accompanied by its reformulated version, which had been prepared by the teacher. The teacher had been asked to re-write the stories of the students making only the necessary changes to make them correct. She was explicitly told to introduce changes at the level of punctuation, coherence and cohesion as well as changes at the level of grammar and vocabulary. We show an extract in (1).

(1) Original text:

“The history started, because in this house Borley Rectory must begin a few sounds and strangers laughs”.

Reformulated text:

“The story of Borley Rectory started when strange laughter and noises were heard in the house”.

The students were asked to compare both versions, find and discuss the differences with their partner in the pair. When they finished they had to explain the differences that they had found to the teacher. This explanation was recorded. Both the discussion and the explanation to the teacher took place in Spanish. Example (2) shows one of these explanations, which corresponds to the extract presented in (1).

(2) Students' explanation

P1A- “*Strangers* que lo he puesto como sustantivo y era adjetivo y para hacer un adjetivo hay que quitar la *r* y la *s* y *laughs* lo había escrito mal también.. eh... ah y luego en un verbo (señala *publicked*) que lo había escrito también mal”.

(Translation)

P1A- “*Strangers*, I wrote this word as a noun and it was an adjective and to make an adjective you have to elide the *r* and the *s*, and *laughs* I also spelled this word incorrectly... eh.. ah and then a verb (pointing at *publicked*), I had spelled it wrong as well”.

Session 3-Self-correction (pair work): One week after session 2, each pair corrected narrative B using the self-correction strategy. This time each pair received a clean copy of the



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original composition, just as originally written, and they were asked to find the errors using dictionaries and textbooks. As in the reformulation session, when they finished they had to explain the errors that they had found to the teacher and the explanation was recorded. Again, both the discussion and the explanation to the teacher took place in Spanish. Example (3) provides an extract from this session.

(3) Original text

“Manolo was a stranger but Manolo and Federico were a very good friends”.

Explanation:

P1A- “Luego, *Federico were a very good friends*, pues hemos quitado la *a*”.

(Translation)

P1A- “Then, *Federico were a very good friends* well we have omitted the *a*”.

In sessions 2 and 3, the pairs finished their peer discussion in about 5 minutes and the explanations each pair gave to the teacher took about 3-4 minutes.

Session 4-Re-writing (individual work): The 16 participants were asked to rewrite both compositions (A and B) individually using a clean copy of the original drafts as a point of departure. As in session 1, they were not allowed to use school materials or ask questions. Each member of the pair had to rewrite both compositions: the one he or she had originally produced and the one his/her partner in the pair had originally produced. This means that every student wrote two final compositions (A and B) individually in this final session.

## 5. Data analysis

In this section we explain how data were coded in order to answer the first research question, that is, the effectiveness of reformulation and self-correction. The second research question, classroom appropriateness, will be analysed in a separate section.

The total number of errors found in the participants' original compositions was initially coded. Note that all types of errors were coded, thus using the term 'error' in a broad sense, and including grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and errors of coherence and cohesion. These errors were classified into two groups: *unreported* and *reported errors*. *Unreported errors* refers to those which students did not explain in the reformulation and self-correction sessions; *reported errors* refers to those which students explained. Next, reported errors were traced to the final compositions. We found three possibilities: (i) the reported error is not modified (e.g. 'publicked' remains 'publicked'); (ii) the reported error is transformed into a correct form (e.g. 'publicked' becomes 'published'); (iii) the reported error is transformed into a new error (e.g. 'publicked' becomes 'publickated').

From this account we discarded new non-target like forms and new corrections in their final drafts (Adams, 2003) as well as errors with very familiar words that seemed to be occasional slips of the pen (such as *ninght* for *night* or *wer* for *were*).

As regards statistical analysis, Z-tests for two proportions were used and all tests were carried out at the 5% significance level.

## 6. Results

The total number of errors found in the original drafts was 130 in the Borley Rectory story (used with reformulation) and 125 in the Thailand story (used with self-correction). Figure 1 shows how many of these errors were reported to the teacher with each strategy.

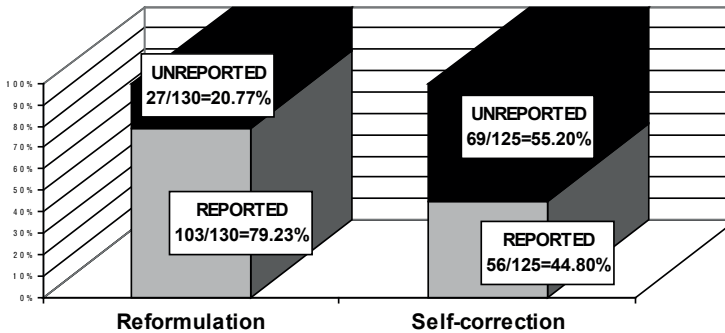


Fig. 1. Group Results: Reported/Unreported errors.

As we see in figure 1, students reported 79.23% of the errors with reformulation (R) and 44.80% with self-correction (SC). This means that more than 50% of the errors remained unreported with self-correction (SC:  $69/125=55.20\%$ ). The difference between both strategies is statistically significant ( $p=0.0001$ ).

As regards the state of these reported errors in the final drafts, figure 3 shows how many were modified and how many of the modified ones were, in fact, correctly modified. As the learners wrote the final compositions individually, both members of the pair (A and B) had the chance to modify every error they found together (Sessions 2 and 3) in their final individual writing (Session 4). Thus, in this figure we double the denominators (the number of reported errors).

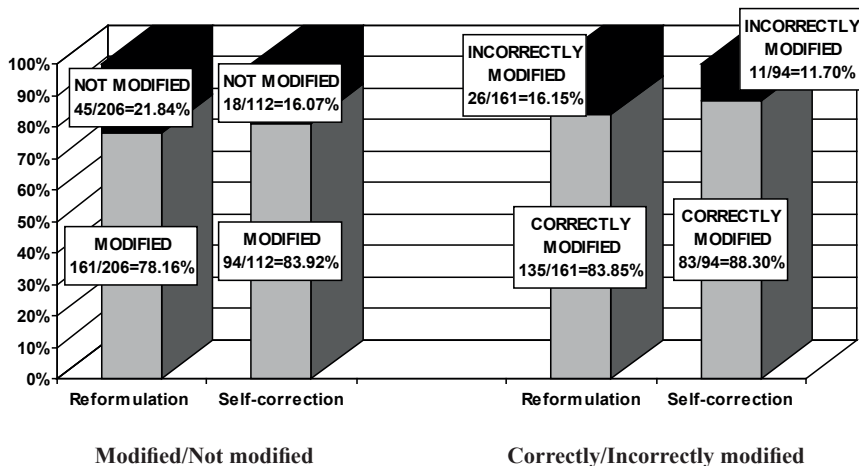


Fig. 3. Group results: Modified/not modified and correctly/incorrectly modified errors.

As we see in figure 3, both strategies reach high rates of modified and of correctly modified errors (modification: R: 78.16%; SC: 83.92%; correction: R: 83.85%; SC: 88.30%). Also, in both aspects the strategies are statistically equal (modification:  $p=0.22$ ; correction:  $p=0.33$ ).

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. Quantity of (un)reported errors

Results show that reformulation has pushed learners to report 79.23% of the total number of errors (103/130) while self-correction has led them to report the smaller percentage of 44.8% (56/125). However, this superiority is restricted to error detection, since once errors are reported both strategies have been equally successful in correctly modifying most of them.

Previous studies on CF have also found that “a crucial variable in error correction is recognising the existence of errors” (Lee, 1997: 473) and that when no feedback is provided learners with a low level of the TL (like ours) might not have the language abilities to spot them (Lee, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Likewise, reformulation has been precisely praised because it pushes learners to “notice the gaps” in their second language production (Adams, 2003; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2002 *inter alia*). The lower level of the TL and the EFL school context of the

students in the present work do not seem to affect the effectiveness of reformulation in this respect.

Despite this difference, both strategies coincide in a very important fact: Even if the teacher did make an effort to modify errors at discourse level in her reformulations (which is, in fact, one of the values of this strategy), learners only reported lexical and grammatical modifications at sentence level, totally disregarding other modifications such as punctuation, elisions of redundant information, reorganization of content etc. This does not coincide with previous studies where participants did focus on errors at text level (Cohen, 1989; Qi & Lapkin, 2001). On the other hand, Lee (1997) also found weaker results for meaning errors (which she operationalized as supersentential errors) and she explained this result on two premises: (i) low level students might find it hard to focus on form and meaning at the same time (VanPatten, 1990) and (ii) learners tend “to perceive editing primarily in terms of bringing about surface changes to texts (...)” (Lee, 1997: 471). Following this author, either the low level of our students or their expectations about what they have to do when being asked to correct might be preventing them from considering the whole text. Using a popular expression we could conclude that our learners “*are missing the forest (the text) for the trees (grammatical and lexical errors)*”. In fact, this can be clearly connected to the product-oriented approach to writing typically used in high-school classrooms which, as the teacher explained, was also the approach she used with her students. That is, the students try to be correct and do not see writing as a process through which ideas are developed and a whole text with its own meaning is created. This finding should be a warning sign for classroom teachers, as it seems to indicate that the SLA process is being approached from an error-based perspective only, thus ignoring many of the complex process that SLA implies.

## 7.2. *Quantity of successfully modified reported errors*

Reformulation and self correction have both reached similar and high rates not only of modification of the reported errors (R: 161/206=78.16%; SC: 94/112=83.92%), but also of subsequent successful correction of those forms in the final compositions (R: 135/161=83.85%; SC: 83/94=88.30%). It seems that, while learners have trouble spotting the errors in the case of self-correction, they do not have trouble correcting the spotted ones, in other words, once errors are detected the cognitive conflict implied in solving them has been resolvable with both strategies. This success can be explained by a combination of factors: learners worked in pairs, which allowed them to pool their resources together to resolve the conflict; they had the aid of the dictionaries and the textbooks in which the original stories were found and, finally, they departed from their own production, which means that the errors they reported were most likely

related to target language forms that were partially internalised. Thus, with the help of the peer and the school materials, they were probably capable of correcting most of the errors they reported.

On the other hand, our learners very often use metalinguistic terminology in their explanations and learners who are oriented to attending to the linguistic form and who make metacomments and rules about the TL perform significantly better (Leow, 1997; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999; Sheen, 2004, 2007).

### 7.3. *Incorrectly modified reported errors*

Finally, although quite low (R: 26/161=16.15%; SC: 11/94=11.70%), the number of incorrectly modified errors is worth being briefly addressed. Based on the analysis of the explanations, we find two different reasons for these errors: (i) The learners do not have enough reasoning abilities to correct the errors and/or understand the corrections (Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005), as we show in (4). (ii) The learners sometimes simply show lack of interest and motivation (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005; Williams, 2001), as in example (5), where we can see that students did not make the effort to look a word up in the dictionary. The fact that our learners took only about 5 minutes to find the errors might also favour the possibility that they are not very motivated.

(4) Original text:

“Although Federico was looking for to Manolo but they didn't find in every day (..)”  
(P1B)

Explanation:

P1A- “Luego ésta que no sabíamos también cómo se decía, queríamos poner *que no se encontraron*, hemos puesto al final *él* o sea se refiere a Federico, que *él* no le encontró a *él* en todo el día”.

(Translation)

P1A- “Then we didn't know how to say this one either, we wanted to say *that they didn't find each other*, at the end we have put *he*, that is, meaning Federico, that *he* didn't find *him* in all day”.

(5) P8A- “Aquí no entendemos lo que es *faked*”.

(Translation)

P8A- “Here we don't understand *faked*”.

#### **7.4. Gains in self-correction**

Even if research has usually concentrated on explaining how different types of feedback have led to higher rates of error correction, it is also interesting to analyze the gains obtained with self-correction. With self-correction students were able to report 44.80% of the errors found in their original compositions and have correctly modified 83.92% of these errors. These gains seem to indicate that all intervening factors (peer discussion-explanations-rewriting) may have played a positive role in error reduction. Determining to what extent every factor (or the interaction of some of them) has contributed to the gains of our students is far beyond our possibilities. It is also interesting to highlight that previous studies have also found gains in their control groups. Ferris & Roberts' (2001) students corrected about 18% of the errors; Ashwell's (2000) 41.3%; Sachs & Polio's (2007) 55.2% and Adams' (2003) 30%. It is our belief that all these gains strengthen the correlation between the different SLA constructs intervening in each study and language learning. Future research could further explore the combination of different types of CF with different constructs. This would constitute an intersection field for a type of research that connects SLA interactionist theories and research on writing.

### **8. Classroom appropriateness**

When the whole study had finished the teacher was interviewed. She was quite satisfied with the results. However, she stated very clearly that she wouldn't integrate reformulation in her classroom on a regular basis because reformulating her students' drafts had taken her a long time and she had felt unsure about whether she had done it properly. This feeling has, in fact, been also gathered by Cohen (1989: 1) "Even after spending much time on a piece of writing an advanced non native writer may have the uncomfortable feeling that a native would not have written it that way". On the contrary, the teacher found it very simple to use the self-correction task, since it takes no extra time or effort, however, she was dissatisfied with the large number of unreported errors.

The teacher also asked the students about their impression in a whole class session and these impressions have, therefore, to be taken with caution, since no individual interview was carried out. The teacher simply asked the students to comment freely on their impressions and several students explained that they felt that they had learnt more than with traditional corrections. The teacher asked the rest of the students if they agreed on this and they all said they did. This coincides with Chandler (2003), whose students, despite getting better results with direct corrections, felt that they had learnt more with indirect prompts. The students in the present study explained

that the activities had forced them to play an active role and pay attention to the errors, while they were used to only looking at the final marks when they got direct corrections. Undoubtedly, this confirms what will come as no surprise to experienced second language teachers, as is the case of Guénette (2007: 40), who recalls her own experience: "I experimented with direct corrections –and then watched my students throw their corrected "written production" into the wastepaper basket before leaving the classroom!"

Students also stated that they had found reformulation very useful and entertaining. Cohen (1982) also reported students' satisfaction with reformulation. Bearing in mind the important role of motivation (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005; Williams, 2001) it could be suggested that this factor might be playing a positive role in the case of this strategy. On the contrary, and as expected by the claims that when no CF is provided low level learners might have difficulty to detect the errors (Lee, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) and/or to correct them (Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2004), the students explained that they had felt quite lost with the self-correction task and, mainly, very unsure about whether they were making the correct hypotheses.

Connecting our findings with these impressions, we can conclude that, at least for the present context, both techniques would need to be adapted in order to be used regularly in the classroom. We suggest the following adaptations (6).

(6). Reformulation and self-correction adapted for the classroom.

(6a). Reformulation of every student's production is not easily applicable to the classroom due to time limitations and task difficulty for the teacher. Nevertheless, given that it motivated the students and had a good impact on error detection and correction, we suggest, as other authors have previously done, to use this strategy by having the whole class working on just one reformulated text (Allwright et al., 1988).

(6b). Self-correction is easily applicable to the classroom context but it requires teacher intervention to help learners spot a larger number of errors. We suggest that all learners work with the same text so that teacher intervention can occur at the end to summarize the findings and complete them. This might be done through a final mini-lesson (Bitchener, 2008).

(6c). As errors beyond sentence level remained unnoticed, in an attempt to broaden students' awareness to discourse features, we suggest that teachers explicitly set textual errors as a goal when using these correction strategies.

Given that similar types of feedback can have different effects in different instructional contexts (Sheen, 2004) we cannot extrapolate our findings, let alone extrapolate the impressions from the teacher or the students to all EFL teachers and

students. Nevertheless, it is our belief that the classroom we are presenting here will display striking similarities with many Spanish high school EFL classrooms.

## 9. Final thoughts

The methodological rigor of empirical studies both on error correction and on reformulation has significantly improved and both types of research coincide in their conclusions: CF and reformulation do help reduce errors on a given text. However, and perhaps more interesting, there is also agreement on the limitations of this statement. Adams (2003) is cautious about the improvement shown by reformulation until further research determines “whether the benefits of noticing facilitated by reformulated writing persist over time and whether they extend to contexts beyond that of the task used in this research” (Adams, 2003: 371). Likewise, methodological advice recently given in research on CF (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Truscott & Yi-ping Hsu, 2008) has put forward the importance of certain methodological issues such as the generally agreed necessity of long term studies and of testing students’ acquired knowledge on a new composition (Truscott & Yi-ping Hsu, 2008).

Herein lie the main limitations of the present work: it neither offers long-term results nor does it test knowledge on new compositions. On the other hand, long-term studies also have the disadvantage, which has been frequently put forward, of receiving more influence from extraneous factors. Similarly, using new pieces of writing can also have the disadvantage that learners might not use in the new compositions those items which were incorrect in their initial ones and, as a consequence, the evolution of those errors cannot be traced.

Truscott & Yi-ping Hsu (2008) have recently tested the effectiveness of CF on a new piece of writing. These authors claim that there are no differences between control and feedback groups in these new pieces and take it as evidence that feedback has no effect beyond self-editing a text. We agree that error reduction on a specific draft is not an uncontroversial measure of learning, nevertheless, we want to emphasize that the opposite, that it is an uncontroversial measure of not-learning, should by no means follow. We would rather like to take our results as suggestive (never conclusive) evidence that the positive effect of the peer dialogues, the explanations and the reformulated texts on our learners’ final drafts can be taken as “at least a valid measure of short-term learning resulting from correction and possibly an indicator of long-term improvement as well” (Truscott & Yi-ping Hsu, 2008: 294). All in all, we know for sure that people learn foreign languages every day, in other words, that definite learning does occur and it seems quite plausible that short-time storage or text-attached acquisition of items are possible first steps towards this definite learning.



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