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Individual differences and WCF processing: Advancing research agendas

Language teachers spend a large part of their working lives marking student work by providing written corrective feedback (WCF). Unfortunately, the impact of WCF is unclear with researchers such as Truscott (1996, 2007) arguing that the time teachers spend on correction is wasted because of the lack of evidence that correction improves students' grammatical abilities. This is largely because providing WCF is deceptively complex. At a basic level, we do not know how students understand and perceive WCF, something made harder by the variety in forms of feedback. Some teachers provide a code indicating the category of the mistake, and others provide the rule which explains why a particular language usage is wrong. We also lack information about the possible relationship between the learners' cognitive engagement and usefulness of feedback. Furthermore, due to the complex nature of WCF and the "incomparability" of WCF studies conducted so far (Ferris, 2004; Guénette, 2007), there is still a need for further studies which examining both short-term and long-term benefits of distinct types and combination of various types of WCF within different contexts (Ellis, et al., 2008).

In this paper, I would argue for the need to conduct further rigorous written corrective feedback studies whilst taking into account the role of such cognitive individual differences as working memory capacity and language aptitude. A large and growing body of research has shown robust WMC effects across various L2 learning mechanisms, production and comprehension skills and abilities (vocabulary learning, speaking, L2 reading and writing, etc.) (Juffs& Harrington, 2011; Linck, et al. 2014; Wen, et al., 2015) and there are theoretical grounds to hypothesize that learners with greater WMC are more likely to benefit from indirect WCF. This hypothesis is motivated by two interrelated premises: (a) under implicit instruction conditions, learners are predominantly left to their own devices to infer or extract regularities and patters (or the underlying rules) in the input; and, (b) learners with higher WMC are more prone to notice, identify and register linguistic rules and then to sustain those features "in an active and readily accessible state" (Conway, et al. 2005, p. 3) so as to establish the form-meaning-context connections which are required for the acquisition of (pragma-) linguistic features. This latter assumption aligns with Doughty's (2001) argument that the efficacy of form-focused instruction depends on, inter alia, the extent to which learners' attention is focused on all three dimensions of form, meaning, and function which is itself regulated by WM system (Sawyer &Ranta, 2001).

Another ID factor which has been shown to be related to a myriad of learning processes and mechanisms (e.g. noticing, perceptual speed, etc.) in both naturalistic and instructed settings is Language Aptitude (Sawyer &Ranta, 2001; Kormos, 2013; Granena, 2016). Robinson characterizes LA as "cognitive abilities information processing draws on during L2 learning and performance in various contexts and at different stages" (2005, p. 46). For some SLA researchers and cognitive psychologists, WM is only one of the subcomponents of the broader construct of Language Aptitude. For example, Miyake and Friedman (1998, p. 339) claimed that "working memory […] may be one (if not the) central component of […] language aptitude". Also, Robinson (2005) considers Phonological Working Memory Capacity (PWMC) and Phonological Working Memory Speed (PWMS) as two basic cognitive abilities which, in conjunction with eight more basic abilities, contribute to the higher order aptitude complexes. In one of the most recent models of LA, the Hi-LAB (High Level Language Aptitude Battery) (Doughty, et al., 2010; Doughty, 2013), working memory and its subcomponents (i.e. executive functioning and phonological short term memory) are amongst the key subconstructs of LA and a separate measure has been put forth for each of their distinct functions. Skehan, too, argues for the linkage between WM, as an aptitude component, and noticing, as one of the SLA processing stages and concludes that WM is a "fundamental component of […] foreign language aptitude" (2012, p. 386). Therefore, future research on the relationship between the efficacy of different WCF types and cognitive abilities needs to take into account these recent developments.