

Written Language and Engagement with Written Corrective Feedback: The Results of Reflective Teaching

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For corrective feedback (CF) to contribute to second language (L2) development, some cognitive processes need to be completed. Learners need to notice and comprehend the CF, reflect on and deeply process it, and finally integrate it into their interlanguage (Gass, 1997). Written languaging (WL), which requires learners to explicitly explain to themselves why they have received CF, has been proposed as a technique which can stimulate deep cognitive processing of the written CF. In an effort to improve learners' writing accuracy, I adopted WL, whereby upon receiving online direct corrections, learners typed their self-explanations regarding the underlying reasons for their writing mistakes. Then, I engaged in systematic reflection and journaling during a 10-week semester to critically analyze the affordances and limitations of WL. The conclusion, drawn from my perceptions of the usefulness of WL originating from my journal writing, is that WL has the potential to not only facilitate learning for students but also can provide teachers with a rich description of learners' cognitive and affective engagement with CF. Some recommendations are made for better implementation of this instructional technique.

Pour que la rétroaction corrective (RC) contribue au développement de la langue seconde (L2), des processus cognitifs doivent se produire. Les apprenants doivent remarquer et comprendre la RC, y réfléchir, la traiter profondément et pour finir, l'intégrer dans leur interlangue (Gass, 1997). La mise en langue écrite (MLE), qui exige des apprenants qu'ils s'expliquent à eux-mêmes de façon explicite pourquoi ils ont reçu de la RC, a été proposée comme une technique qui peut stimuler le traitement cognitif profond de la RC écrite. Dans le but d'améliorer la précision de la rédaction des apprenants, j'ai adopté la MLE, où, lorsqu'ils recevaient les corrections directes en ligne, les apprenants tapaient leurs propres explications sur les raisons pour lesquelles ils avaient commis des erreurs écrites. Ensuite, je me suis employé à réfléchir systématiquement et à tenir un journal pendant les 10 semaines que durait le semestre, afin d'analyser de façon critique les opportunités et les limitations de la MLE. La conclusion, tirée de mes perceptions de l'utilité de

la MLE puisées dans mon journal, est que la MLE a non seulement le potentiel de faciliter l'apprentissage des apprenants, mais peut aussi fournir aux enseignants une riche description de l'engagement cognitif et affectif des apprenants eu égard à la RC. Des recommandations sont faites pour une meilleure mise en œuvre de cette technique d'enseignement.

Keywords: languaging, written corrective feedback, reflection, journaling, cognitive and affective engagement

The Occupation-specific Language Training (OSLT) courses were designed by Ontario colleges and are funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to help newcomers to improve their language skills. Writing accurate emails is an integral part of the program and because explicit grammar instruction is not embedded in the OSLT curriculum, teachers tend to rely on corrective feedback (CF) to remedy linguistic errors in students' writing. Even though CF can be effective in second language (L2) development (Ferris & Kurzer, 2019), some learners fail to benefit from it (Bitchener, 2017) due to low levels of cognitive engagement with the feedback (Boggs, 2019) and/or incomprehensibility of it (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019). *Languaging* has been recommended as a technique that not only involves deep cognitive engagement (Suzuki, 2012) but can also reveal whether learners understand the CF (Swain, 2006). The term "languaging" was coined by Swain (2006) to refer to "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (p. 98). Through reflection and the articulation of thoughts, learners can discover new aspects of a phenomenon as well as deepen their understanding of it (Suzuki, 2012).

I, as a teacher-researcher, decided to implement languaging as both an instructional technique and a way to further consolidate learning. Richards and Lockhart (1994) argue that the decisions teachers make regarding what method or technique best serves their goals can be theory-driven or based on their experience. My decision to adopt languaging was theoretically informed. In this regard, Wallace (1996) recommends that teachers use theory to mediate some aspects of their practice rather than to move the whole classroom practice into academic theory. In doing so, teachers need to engage in reflective teaching, whereby they examine and analyze their practice and its underlying rationale to generate alternatives and make modifications when needed (Stanley, 1998). Through reflection, teachers can effectively adapt a theory rather than uncritically adopt it (Harnett, 2012). This prompted me to engage with reflection through journal writing to critically analyze the implementation of languaging technique in my class. Both students and I engaged in languaging, but with different yet overlapping goals; students

used languaging to improve their writing accuracy, while I used it to reflect on the usefulness of a tool which could assist them in realizing their goal.

This paper will begin with a brief discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of languaging and the findings of some relevant empirical studies. It will then present the theoretical framework for the reflection process which was adopted to evaluate my experience with languaging. The last section presents the results of my reflection and experience with languaging during a 10-week OSLT course.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Languaging and its Types

Swain (2006) conceives language not only as a communicative but also a cognitive tool which is drawn upon for reflection and problem solving in order to reach a new and durable understanding. Since its inception, languaging has been adopted as both an instructional technique (Ishikawa, 2018) and a cognitive tool for better learner engagement (Suzuki, 2012). Its significance, as Storch (2013) explains, lies in the notion that it might enable learners to understand the linguistic issues that they did not understand before.

Languaging can take different forms. *Private speech* is done by softly sounding out thoughts and reflections to the self, which if not vocalized, is referred to as *inner speech* (pure meaning) (Vygotsky, 1986). Alternatively, to solve a problem or build knowledge, the explanation can be written, which is *written languaging* (WL), or shared with a peer, which is *collaborative dialogue* (Swain, 2006). Languaging is an overarching term encompassing all these constructs irrespective of the modality, whether it is done orally or in writing.

WL can have more language learning potential because unlike oral languaging, it is slow-paced and permanent (William, 2012). These two features are likely to lower the cognitive load, help free up the cognitive resources, and allow more in-depth processing (Kormos, 2012). When written, abstract thoughts are turned into concrete objects, which afford learners the chance to deliberate upon them (Swain, 2006) as if they were recorded on an external memory drive (Suzuki, 2012).

Previous Studies on WL

Several studies have combined the use of WL and written corrective feedback (WCF) to enhance cognitive engagement and L2 development. The first studies on WL focused on how writing self-explanation might correlate with making more successful revisions (Moradian et al., 2017; Suzuki, 2009, 2012). Besides revealing that languaging can improve the grammatical accuracy in the revision tasks, these studies have two important implications about languaging. First, languaging can reveal what percentage of feedback is ambiguous for learners. Second, learners can mediate their cognition by

explaining the rules to themselves and reflecting on them without the need to interact with others.

These studies focused only on *feedback for accuracy*, which is the learners' ability to make revisions, and not on *feedback for acquisition*, which is transferring the acquired knowledge to a new writing task (Manchón, 2011). There have been three recent studies that examined the effects of languaging on feedback for acquisition. Fukuta et al. (2019) found no difference between languaging followed by self-correction and languaging in response to indirect feedback given by the teacher. Their finding reinforces the previous assumptions that indirect CF can be confusing (Suzuki, 2012). In contrast, direct feedback coupled with languaging can result in higher uptake, deeper processing, and more accuracy (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019). Comparing the relative effectiveness of self-languaging to a one-on-one conference with the teacher on L2 development, Boggs (2019) did not find any significant differences. Her finding is surprising given that languaging with the teacher is expected to yield better results than self-languaging. Overall, these studies indicate that languaging increases noticing and cognitive engagement; however, whether this engagement enables more effective learning still merits further research.

Theoretical Framework for Reflection

Journal writing is one of the most popular reflective procedures (Abednia et al., 2013) due to its affordances. For one thing, reflection and ideas are recorded for further contemplation (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Another significant benefit is that “the process of writing itself helps trigger insights about teaching” (Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 7) and serves as a discovery process, which translates into a new understanding of a phenomenon (Bowman, 1983). Finally, it can help teachers make explicit their tacit beliefs for critical consideration (Crandall, 2000). In other words, it equips teachers with a new lens to consider all the possibilities and problematize the routine, and not be blinded by some engrained teaching philosophies without questioning them (Freeman, 2016).

There is no consensus on how critical reflection should be operationalized (Akbari, 2007). Generally, it can be conducted in three main phases: before teaching, while teaching, and after teaching, which have been referred to by different terms in the literature. Richards and Lockhart (1994) refer to them as *planning* decisions, *interactive* decisions (on-the-spot) and *evaluative* decisions respectively. Schön (1983), however, used different terms: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*, with the former referring to reflection while the action is in progress and the latter happening after the action is complete. Killon and Todnew (1991) introduced a third stage: *reflection-for-action*, which is done to guide future action and is based on the outcome of the previous stages (Farrell, 2013).

The Procedure for Journaling and Reflection

I wrote journal entries in four stages: planning, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
The Reflection Stages



Planning

For effective instruction and reflection, it is necessary to have a theoretical knowledge of the instructional technique because it offers a lens “to analyze and reproduce or reconstruct accounts of practice” (Thiessen, 2000, p. 530). Before experimenting with languaging, I consulted previous studies to gain a theoretical knowledge of its constructs and to decide on how to implement it. The first journal entry, which was the planning stage, was carried out by reflecting on some questions I had posed regarding the implementation of WL. The findings of this stage are presented in the results section (Planning Decisions).

Reflection-in-Action

As learners were engaged with languaging on Google Docs, I made observations and took notes for further reflection.

Reflection-on-Action

Reflection-on-action is fed by the previous stages and the evidence collected from the execution of the lesson, which can result in affirmation of the current practice or some modifications (Farrell & Ives, 2015). This stage occurred at the end of each week with reflection on the content of the current and the previous weeks. Each week, for 10 weeks, I wrote a journal entry of 200–300 words summarizing my perceptions of the affordances and limitations of the WL technique.

Reflection-for-Action

Having reflected on the past, teachers should make some decisions for the future, i.e., reflection-for-action. Without a prospective and critical dimension, reflection is unlikely to contribute to development and constructive outcomes (Akbari, 2007). Therefore, after completing the entry following the reflection-on-action, I wrote a short entry (about 100 words) noting the changes to be implemented for the next teaching phase. The entries from both stages (reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action) formed one entry.

Overall, there were 10 journal entries, each of which contained information regarding the affordances and limitations of WL (emerging from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action) along with some potential solutions (from the reflection-for-action stage).

The Writing Tasks and the Implementation of WL

Every week for 10 weeks, the students ($n = 18$) were asked to write an email (a minimum of 150 words) on a work-related topic such as requesting sick leave or admitting a mistake to an employer, and the like. Direct CF was provided where the ill-formed structure was crossed out and the correction was written, and where necessary, the extra word was deleted, and the missing word was inserted. To operationalize WL, the students were required to write their thoughts in response to the following prompt, taken from Suzuki (2012): “Why is this linguistic form incorrect?” Their response was self-directed, and they wrote their reflection in brackets in Google Docs next to the corrections. WL was exemplified using the following sample (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019, p. 873):

Error: *She has been my best friend ~~since~~ for 11 years.*

WL example: *SINCE 11 years. The preposition is wrong. The correct preposition is FOR, because it refers to the duration of the action.*

The Results of my Reflection:

In what follows, I will first present the decisions made before the implementation of languaging which were guided by theory and research findings, and then, I will discuss the results of my reflection during the three stages of reflection on, in, and for action.

Planning Decisions

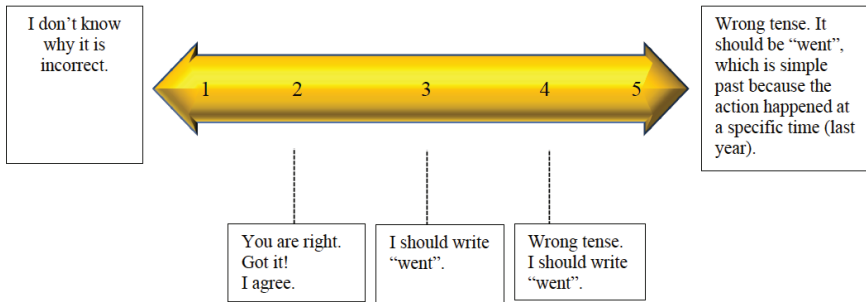
The first decision was about whether languaging would be suitable for OSLT learners based on their proficiency level (i.e., intermediate). The answer was affirmative as previous studies have indicated that languaging is the most effective with more proficient learners (Ishikawa, 2013; Suzuki & Itagaki, 2009) and not beginners (Fukuta et al., 2019).

The other decision was about whether learners would use languaging in response to direct or indirect feedback. I chose direct feedback since, unlike indirect feedback which can be confusing (Fukuta et al., 2019), it has been found to enhance accuracy and generate more languaging (Moradian et al., 2017; Suzuki, 2012).

Comprehension of CF has been shown to correlate with long-term acquisition (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019). To ascertain that learners would notice the CF and process it, they were required to write an explanation, with or without the metalinguistic terms, to indicate that they had reflected on and understood the nature of the error (Ishikawa, 2018; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Storch, 2008; Suzuki, 2012, 2017). The purpose was to encourage deep cognitive engagement, conceptualized as noticing plus the provision of an explanation for their erroneous output, and avoid what Qi and Lapkin (2001) referred to as *perfunctory* processing, which is an indication of mere noticing and repetition of the CF with no further explanation. Noticing coupled with the provision of a reason can increase the likelihood of benefiting from CF by 1.30 times more (Suzuki, 2017).

Nicolás-Conesa et al. (2019) specified five levels of analysis based on the depth of processing when languaging: level of noticing (level 1), level of reporting (level 2 and 3), and level of understanding (levels 4 and 5), with level 1 representing the lowest level of processing and level 5 the highest. Due to being thorough and detailed, this model of operationalization was adapted in order to make it easier for learners to understand what is meant by deep processing of information. The learners were shown Figure 2 along with the examples and were instructed to engage deeply with the CF (levels 4 and 5).

Figure 2
Different Levels of Cognitive Engagement



Post-Teaching Reflection: Reflection-in-on-for-Action

To analyze the journal entry data from the reflection-in-on-for-action stages, the interactive data condensation and conclusion verification process was used (Miles et al., 2014). The process started with focusing on and selecting the episodes that discussed at length or alluded to the affordances and limitations of WL as well as those that proposed solutions. The overlapping pieces of data were classified under the same overarching themes. Five major themes emerged from the 10 entries:

1. Low Levels of Processing (Perfunctory Engagement) and Potential Solutions

The first few journal entries reflected what Boggs (2019) had suggested can happen when implementing a new technique; the lack of experience with a CF type or an instructional technique is likely to diminish engagement. Here is an excerpt from the first journal entry:

The students do not seem to be using metalanguage to explain their errors. In other words, they mostly repeat the correction they have received or simply thank me for giving them feedback. There could be two reasons for this. First, they did not quite understand what I wanted them to do. Second, direct CF spoon-feeds them, and therefore they do not need to process it any further. I need to make sure that they process the CF more deeply.

Two steps were taken to address the issue: First, more examples of languaging involving engagement levels 4 and 5 were given, then a synchronous session was held where the learners could ask questions about the WL procedure.

2. A Combination of Languageing and Collaborative Dialogue in an Iterative Procedure

The following excerpt highlights a potential limitation of WL and self-directed talk; it might be unnatural to write to oneself explaining the grammar mistake, and therefore students might tend to engage in a dialogue with the teacher rather than doing self-talk.

Despite being instructed to self-explain, the students seem to be having a strong tendency to interact with me on a wide range of issues, ranging from what I think about the given topic to asking questions about grammar or vocabulary.

To further establish rapport, I took the opportunity and wrote back to them. This seemed particularly necessary given that the blended course became fully online due to COVID-19, and there was little chance for interaction during breaks and before or after the class, as would be the case in face-to-face classes. With regard to the clarification requests such as “what is the difference between x and y ?”, learners were informed that it would not be languageing if they asked me and not themselves, but they were allowed to pose questions when reflection and languageing failed to yield any results. This decision was informed by the central premise of sociocultural theory which posits that learning occurs through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

The decision to allow the learners to use languageing and engage in collaborative dialogue (in writing) with the teacher meant that the one-shot reflection and CF session would need to become an iterative process where the teacher-learner interaction in a single draft would continue to clarify any confusion. Online tools provided some affordances for the implementation of this change since learners could colour-code their questions to be distinct from languageing.

The iterative CF procedure, combining both languageing and interaction, can be beneficial from two perspectives. First, the interaction can lower the chances of teacher *appropriation* (taking over) of student writing because learners can negotiate what they intend to say and reject the changes they do not approve. Students resent it when teachers impose their ideas, vocabulary, phrases, or even structures in the pursuit of creating a perfect text (Ferris, 1995a). Through languageing and collaborative dialogue, learners can exercise their agency to avoid appropriation (Swain, 2006). Second, languageing can reveal if learners fail to grasp the nature of the problem despite receiving CF, and the iterative process makes it possible for the teacher to mediate further. Direct correction of errors does not guarantee understanding and learning, as indicated in the study by Nicolás-Conesa et al. (2019) where the participants could successfully correct only half of their errors in the posttest. Without understanding the underlying reason for the CF, learners are less likely to learn (Ferris, 1995b; Suzuki, 2012). This is why, in our class, when learners indicated that they did not know why they were corrected, I sometimes

provided a CF type referred to as *concordance* (Kılıçkaya, 2019), whereby a link is inserted next to the error which takes students to a website that gives examples and explanation for that specific error category. For instance, for grammar mistakes, they were referred to BBC Learning English (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish>) which contains videos, descriptions of rules, examples, and exercises for different grammar lessons. For collocation mistakes, they were referred to Sketch Engine for Language Learning (<https://skell.sketchengine.eu>), a search engine that shows what word combinations and phrases are possible.

3. *Languaging and Emotions*

Swain (2013b) perceives emotion and cognition as inseparable, arguing that when engaged with languaging, students are likely to express their emotions besides cognitive engagement. This argument has been supported by research. Caras (2019) instructed the participants in her study to think aloud and explain the reasons for the corrections they had received (i.e., oral languaging), and even though they were not prompted to express their feelings, the transcripts of the think-alouds revealed several emotional episodes (e.g., “Ah, this [the corrective feedback] is stressing me out”) (p. 193). Assuming that emotion and cognition are intertwined and interdependent, we need a tool to tap into both. The following excerpt from the journals proposes WL as a potential tool for doing so:

Even though, when instructing the learners to engage with languaging, we (teachers) underscore the significance of cognitive engagement and depth of processing, I predict that WL can also be a tool for learners to express their feelings about the mistakes they have made, or the corrections they have received, mainly because they are writing to themselves, which is a low-stakes arena for expressing emotional reactions.

Swain (2013b) recommends that teachers tap into the emotional responses to better understand why learners differ in cognitive engagement with the same activities done in the class. Heeding Swain’s recommendation, I decided to encourage the students to use languaging as a mediating tool for both thinking and emoting by asking them to reply to the prompt: “How do you feel about the corrections?” Encouraging students to do so is important because if they express a positive feeling, the act of writing and reflecting on it can further foster it (Swain, 2013a). Also, feeling positive about the corrections in WL has been shown to correlate with better noticing, engagement with CF, and making fewer mistakes (Simard & Zuniga, 2020). On the other hand, when students express frustration with the CF (e.g., “why do I keep making this mistake?”), the teacher can intervene to help reduce the negative reaction by explaining that “error is a natural part of language acquisition and that it may even signal progress, rather than deficiency,” and that language learning takes time and patience (Ferris, 2011, p.131).

4. *Languaging and Error Types*

Corder (1967) made a distinction between *errors* (i.e., non-target like forms which cannot be self-corrected) and *mistakes* (i.e., deviant forms that can be self-corrected) and suggested targeting the former given that learners can handle the latter on their own. As logical as it sounds, in practice, it can be unfeasible for teachers to distinguish an error from a mistake (Pawlak, 2014). As the following excerpt shows, when self-explaining the underlying reason for an error, the students can indicate whether the ill-formed structure in their writing is a mistake or an error:

When going over the WCF, students can decide if the correction they have received contains new knowledge (error) or something they already know (mistake). In case of the latter, it is advisable to allow students to skip the mistakes in favor of languaging about errors. This can lower the workload, especially because sometimes learners complain that languaging for all erroneous structures can be time-consuming. Also, knowing the nature of the error helps me [the teacher] know what errors to focus on when teaching grammar.

5. *Online Languaging*

The final excerpt highlights three important benefits of engaging with WL via Google Docs:

First, Google Docs made it possible to easily interact with the students and repeatedly make changes. This is in line with process writing method wherein essay writing is viewed as involving multi-drafts. Second, unlike in handwritten essays, learners could add their reflections without crossing out and making the paper messy. Finally, since all essays are saved in one file, the teacher and learners can see the developmental trajectory.

Conclusion

Languaging “is a psychological tool by which we internalize new ideas and talk ourselves into understanding something we did not understand before” (Swain, 2013b, p. 202). This, however, is not the only function of languaging because, after reflection, I realized that it has the potential to go beyond cognitive engagement. Engagement is a multidimensional construct with three underlying, interrelated constructs: *behavioural engagement* refers to participation and involvement with the tasks; *cognitive engagement* is the willingness to try to understand a phenomenon; and *emotional engagement* refers to the positive or negative reactions to the surroundings (Fredricks et al., 2004). Languaging has the potential to involve the three levels. It

encourages active participation given that learners are required to reflect and react to the CF they have received (i.e., behavioural engagement). If implemented well, it can tap into deep cognitive processes through metalinguistic explanations (i.e., cognitive engagement), and above all, it can tap into affective engagement and bring learners' emotional responses to the surface (i.e., emotional engagement). Put simply, in addition to helping students to learn better, languaging provides teachers with a window into learners' cognitive processes and emotional reactions, enabling them to know when the learners are struggling to understand the correction, and how they feel about it.

To better exploit the affordances of WL, teachers can take into account these recommendations. First, teachers should adopt iterative, process-oriented feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2019) where learners, upon failing to understand the reason for their mistakes, have a chance to request clarifications after receiving the CF and languaging. This is important because being able to make revisions depends more on understanding the feedback than the depth of languaging (Suzuki, 2009). Second, to prevent cognitive overload and better engagement, students should be allowed to skip languaging for what they perceive as slips and careless mistakes (e.g., typos), and instead, allocate their focal attention to errors that occur due to insufficient knowledge. This can encourage them to hypothesize the underlying reason for the error, which is deemed a deep cognitive processing. Finally, if WL fails to elicit deep processing, teachers can provide a clue such as the error code (e.g., verb-tense error) in addition to direct correction to further provoke reflection on the error. As for the sentential, organizational, and paragraph-level errors, given that a single-word correction might not be effective, teachers can pose a question to further prompt learners to reflect on the errors (e.g., what is your topic sentence?).

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