TOWARDS GREATER LEARNER AUTONOMY IN FEEDBACK ON WRITING TASKS

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Abstract
This study explores the relationship between the concept of learner autonomy and feedback given on writing tasks in the second language (L2) setting. It takes on a linguistic perspective to demonstrate how learner autonomy may be fostered during writing conferences with L2 learners. It then examines the effect with such interaction has on L2 writers. Findings suggest that the attempt to generate autonomy during writing conferences results in learner composed goals which not only indicate evidence of reflectivity but also reveal instances of metalearning. More importantly, the study shows that writing instructors may often mistakenly presuppose that learners have reached their perspective on a writing revision at a point much earlier than expected. Hence, the instructor’s presupposition of the point at which the learner has truly understood the writing error needs to be revised since learners seem to become cognitively engaged at a point much later than after they claim understanding of the revision being made. The theoretical implications of how feedback may be an area of great potential for enacting learner autonomy are then discussed.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Feedback, Reflectivity, Metalearning

Introduction
Definition of learner autonomy
Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little 1991:4).

The concept of learner autonomy entails that the learner assumes increased responsibility for learning thus shifting the balance of authority between students and
instructor found in more traditional learning settings (Thanasoulas 2000). It represents the capacity for learners to recognize that they are responsible for their learning and take an active role through being involved in all aspects of the learning process (Little 1991). According to Sercu (2002), the view of learning as knowledge passed over to learners in a structured way should be discarded. Instead, developing learner autonomy requires an emphasis on cognitive skills and deeper levels of processing.

According to Hurd (2005), while numerous theoretical descriptions appear, a unified universal theory related to learner autonomy still does not exist. Learner autonomy thus continues to remain obscure as a concept especially in the field of language learning. For Dickinson (1995), the asserted power of learner autonomy may be justified by the apparent ties it has with educational theories of motivation.

**Learner autonomy: Vygotsky and social constructivism**

Theoretically, the major influence on the concept of learner autonomy is derived from social constructivism and the ideas of Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that social interaction is essential to learning and the development of all higher cognitive functions. He held that all behavioral autonomy is the product of interactive dialogic processes in the zone of proximal development which represents the difference between what the learner can carry out independently and what the learner can perform when guided by an expert. Such discursive interaction would eventually lead to a learner’s capacity for self-regulation whereby the learner completes a task independently without guided assistance (Adair-Hauck and Donato 1994). For Little (2003), the concept of supported performance embodied in Vygotskian theory allows the main role of the instructor to become the creation of an autonomous learning environment. Thanasoulas (2000) similarly holds that the concept of learner autonomy not only abides by constructivism, but also operates within it.

**Learner autonomy in the field of second language acquisition**

Learner autonomy has become a major concern in the field of second language acquisition. Research literature in the field has recently focused on instructional methods which may be used to foster learner autonomy among second language (L2) learners (Dam 2001….from Vickers and Ene (2006). With reference to L2 learning, Dickinson (1999 :2…from Murphey and Jacobs (2000)) defines learner autonomy as ‘an attitude to learning that the learner develops in which the learner is willing and able to make the significant decisions about her learning.’ Since learner autonomy is recognized as beneficial in fostering language learning, Vickers and Ene (2006) stress the need to examine L2 learning tasks that encourage learner autonomy.
An important area where learner autonomy should be addressed is in the teaching of L2 writing. Indeed, Ferris (2002) stresses the need for such autonomy in writing by advising L2 learners to become more aware of their error patterns when they review their writing. Despite the recognition of the importance of learner autonomy in the area of L2 writing, the relationship between feedback, which plays a significant role in the development of L2 writing, and learner autonomy and has not been fully explored. According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), many questions relating to feedback and L2 writing have not been fully addressed by the research literature. Instructors therefore often sense that they are not using feedback to its full potential. This would have been quite acceptable during the 1980’s and early 1990’s when there was relative doubt with regard to the role of written instructor feedback in the improvement of writing skills (Hyland and Hyland 2006). In the context of 2nd language learning, Zamel (1985) had similarly questioned the effectiveness of instructor feedback on student writing. More recent research, however, maintains a more positive note regarding instructor feedback as being central to the development of second language writing skills. Indeed, it is more crucial for L2 writers than other forms of response such as peer feedback whose effect on improving writing may often times be only peripheral (Connor and Asenavage 1994). Dheram (1995) similarly stresses the centrality of feedback to the teaching of writing. As such, it is necessary to explore the relationship between such a central aspect of L2 writing, feedback, and learner autonomy. Hyland and Hyland (2006) specifically stress the need for studies on the role which feedback plays in creating autonomous writers.

**The focus of the present study**

The present study formulates such an attempt to foster autonomy among L2 learners in relation to feedback on writing tasks. The following paper seeks to:

1. Describe the discourse characteristic of interaction in which instructor feedback on writing aims at fostering autonomy for the L2 learner.
2. Examine the effect which such interaction focused on fostering learner autonomy has on the L2 learner.

**Background**

The study was carried out at the Gulf University for Science and Technology, a newly established institution that has a cooperation agreement with the University of Missouri at St. Louis. It involved ten first year university students who were all learning English as a second language. They were chosen from three different sections of a three credit composition course which introduces students to the fundamentals of writing through covering two
rhetorical modes of essay writing. Emphasis in this course is placed on writing as a process as students are encouraged to take responsibility for developing their own writing skills.

Following the completion of the 1st draft of writing, the usual procedure had been for the instructor to provide written feedback on the draft which the L2 learner would then be expected to keep rewriting, making revisions until it is ready to submit for evaluation; of course this is not to undermine feedback received from other sources such as self and peers, but the concern of the present paper is strictly related to feedback from the instructor since it is viewed as being the most central in L2 writing classes. Although this process was found to improve student writing, written feedback from the instructor on its own seemed to be insufficient as the process had several drawbacks. First, it was noticed that students in general came to internalize instructor comments on writing at a point much later than expected. Thus, even though a particular revision would be made by an instructor on several drafts, it would only get recognized by a student independently on subsequent assignments. Second, and most importantly, this feedback process in itself often boiled down to the instructor spending lengthy periods of time revising and editing papers while students passively accepted that feedback by applying the necessary revisions without cognitively contemplating or reflecting on those revisions. There seemed to be a need for a revision process that more actively engages students on a metacognitive level.

As a result of those observations, this procedure had to be abandoned in response to the overarching aim of this study which was to increase learner autonomy among L2 learners during feedback on writing tasks. The concept of learner autonomy underlying such an attempt was borrowed from the three pedagogical principles which Little (2000) uses to characterize learner autonomy, namely the principle of learner empowerment whereby learners take charge of their learning processes and feel responsible for their for their own learning; the principle of reflectivity which necessitates that learners engage in reflection in order to monitor and plan their learning; and the principle of appropriate target language use which requires learners to use the target language in discursive interaction.

In this study, the two principles of learner empowerment and appropriate target language use came to formulate the vehicle which the instructor made use of for increasing learner autonomy. These two principles entailed that the instructor, rather than simply providing written comments on writing tasks, would provide feedback through oral interaction whereby the instructor during office hours scheduled a conference with each L2 learner to discuss feedback on their writing. This relates to the social-interactive dimension of learner autonomy indicated by Little (2000). Each 30 minute long conference involved joint
exploration of the writing revision through a dialogic interactive process. These conferences were not only meant to empower the learner but also provided an opportunity for target language use. The principle of reflectivity, on the other hand, came to formulate the aim of this discursive interaction. The aim of the instructor during each writing conference was to encourage reflection among the learners so that they may monitor and assess their writing. These three principles in fact work together in a process whereby the instructor met with a learner in a conference which involved exploratory dialogue using the target language in order to make the student reflect on their learning and thus work towards achieving greater learner autonomy. According to Little (2000), learner empowerment, reflectivity, and appropriate target language use are three principles which cannot, in fact, be distinguished; they work closely together and should therefore be viewed holistically.

**Methodology**

Conferences aimed at fostering learner autonomy through the revision of writing were held with each of the ten students who took part in the study. Of the ten conferences carried out, four were chosen to be audio taped and transcribed for the analysis of discourse. These particular conferences were chosen because according to the instructor, they involved discussion of what formulated the most commonly occurring revision problems in writing. As a result, it was felt that they would be more representative of writing hurdles which L2 learners face. The aim of the analysis was to describe the discourse of the interaction in which the instructor attempts to foster learner autonomy through feedback and observe the effect of this on L2 learners.

The analysis of the discourse in the conferences was based on the Burton (1981) model which is directly derived from the Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) model. Although the Sinclair and Coulthard model is specifically tailored to the classroom context, the Burton model was opted for because the nature of the conferences differs from that of a classroom lesson. For one thing, only 2 people, the instructor and the learner are involved. Also, the conferences took place outside the classroom and focused specifically on one topic, the revision of a writing problem. Originally formulated to apply to casual conversation (Eggins and Slade 1997), it was felt that the Burton model is flexible enough to apply to the discourse of these conferences. Most importantly, this model does not over-privilege the instructor’s role in the discourse.

As with the Sinclair and Coulthard model, the scheme set forth by Burton is essentially hierarchical whereby Lessons formulate the largest units of discourse. Lessons are made up of Transactions which embody Exchanges related to particular topics covered in
the discourse. In turn, Exchanges consist of Moves which formulate individual turns. Finally, the smallest units of discourse are the Speech Acts which comprise the Moves. The Burton model expands on the original Sinclair and Coulthard model at the level of both the Speech Acts where she includes a few modifications; and at the level of Moves whereby the original Initiation, Response, and Feedback also includes Opening, Challenging, Supporting, Bound-Opening, Re-Opening, Framing, and Focusing moves. Opening moves consist of topics which are considered new in relation to the discourse that precedes them; Challenging moves hold the progress of a topic; and Supporting moves keep the interaction focused to facilitate the topic of discourse. While Bound-Opening moves reintroduce a topic after a Supporting move, Re-Opening moves reintroduce a topic after a Challenging move. Finally, Focusing and Framing moves serve to mark the boundaries of a transaction by appearing before a topic and functioning to capture attention.

In addition to the transcription and analysis of the discourse during the writing conferences, the L2 learners who took part in each conference were also asked to record their thoughts and comments on how the conference took place in a short retrospective self-report which they filled out directly after the writing conference. The reports did not place a limit on student responses; they simply provided some general guiding points related to the conference as an instructional method which the students were asked to comment on open endedly. The points which the students were asked to comment on included instructional aspects they liked about the conference, aspects they disliked, and an evaluation of their learning of the writing revision. There were three main rationales behind these self-reports. First, the inequality in terms of power distribution present among the instructor and student in these conferences entailed that fewer turns would be taken by the student in comparison to the instructor. According to Muncie (2000), the fact the instructor both gives feedback and later evaluates the writing gives learners less of a chance to be critical about the feedback received. Hence, it was felt that having them record their thoughts on these conferences gives students more voice in the process. Another justification for using self-reports is related to the fact that conferences geared at fostering learner autonomy where somewhat new to these L2 learners. As a result, it was felt important to allow them to further reflect on not only their writing, but also this new pedagogical practice and joint exploration instruction and which is more student centered. Finally, and most importantly, though self-reports were part of the methodology in this study, they were also chosen to serve a pedagogical function. By encouraging evaluation and raising awareness of learning strategies, they may also be considered a means for further fostering learner autonomy.
**Data analysis**

In an initial attempt to foster learner autonomy based on Little’s (2000) three principles of learner autonomy, the instructor held a writing conference with each L2 learner whereby they jointly explored the writing revision to be made. During all conferences, the instructor went through a prompting process meant to prepare the learner to formulate goals which specifically state writing areas to be worked on by the end of the conference. The aim of the instructor throughout was to encourage reflection for the learner. This necessitated that data analysis should first describe the discourse characteristic of those conferences where an attempt to foster learner autonomy was made through instructor feedback during the revision of writing. This first step was deemed necessary in order to turn to the more primary focus of data analysis which examined the effect which this interaction had on the L2 learners.

In what follows, excerpts from both the retrospective self-reports that students filled out directly following two of the writing conferences as well as excerpts from the transcripts of those same two writing conferences will be used to discuss how data analysis was carried out. A complete transcript of both conferences, coded according to the Burton (1981) model of spoken discourse, are provided in the Appendix (2) along with the notes on the coding scheme (Appendix 1). All writing conferences were initiated by L2 learners who requested feedback from the instructor on a difficulty they were facing in their writing of a comparison and contrast essay. The two conferences were chosen in particular because they presented two different cases of writing difficulties and were thus felt to be the most representative of the four writing conferences. The first one, referred to here as Conference A, involved a case of an L2 learner who requested help after initially knowing what the writing problem was but being unaware of how to go about in order to revise it. The second case, referred to as Conference B, involved a learner who, although facing a writing difficulty, was not aware of where the problem lied exactly. The basic structure of each conference involved three stages. Taking the writing difficulty as a starting point, the instructor first analyzed that difficulty and explored a solution with the learner. The second stage involved relating the writing problem to previous learning concepts discussed in class. Once the instructor felt that the learner was ready, the learner was requested to specifically pinpoint the writing problem in the final stage.

**The findings of the study**

**Focus 1**

Data revealed that in all four writing conferences, the instructor relied on scaffolding his feedback in order to make the learner arrived at his perspective of the task and generate reflectivity. Originating with the work of Wood et al (1976), scaffolding is a subtle process
that involves successive attempts by the instructor to transfer responsibility of a joint task to the learner based on the learner’s readiness to take on increased responsibility. According to Kunschak (2007), in order to foster learner autonomy, students need to be guided in a scaffolded way. Analysis of the discourse in the writing conferences revealed several scaffolding functions. For the sake of brevity since the primary emphasis in this study is not on this first focus, only the two major scaffolding functions which characterized the instructor’s discourse will be discussed. The first of these involves what Edwards and Mercer (1987) refer to as cued elicitation where the instructor, while asking questions, gives clues that would help the learners arrive at their perspective of the task and formulate a writing goal. Excerpt 1 below taken from Conference A will be used to illustrate this prompt process at the level of speech acts.

**EXCERPT 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column 1 represents speech turns</th>
<th>Column 2 represents the speakers involved in the discussion</th>
<th>Column 3 represents the speech acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23. T O m OK./</td>
<td>el So what is the problem you have in your essay?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. G C rep Um</td>
<td>^ (hesitates)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. T RO s From the stuff that we talked about in class,/</td>
<td>p What is this related to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. G C rep That relates to</td>
<td>^ (hesitates.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. T RO p The reader needs to know what the paragraph is about.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. G S ms I'm not sure about it/</td>
<td>rep but like I remember the circles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. T BO p The Venn diagram?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. G S rep Yeah, the Venn diagram./</td>
<td>I You take some differences and things that are the same and then you have something to put in your paragraph.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this excerpt, the instructor attempts to relate the writing problem which the learner has to the Venn Diagrams previously discussed in class. His initial *elicit* at (23) which according to Burton (1981) functions to request a linguistic response, directly asks the student to relate the writing problem to previous learning. When the student at (24) hesitates, the instructor engages in a series of *prompts* which according to Burton (1981) function to reinforce previous *elicits*. Closer study of these *prompts* shows how they provide clues that would help the learner arrives at the instructor’s perspective of the task at hand and relates the writing problem to the Venn Diagrams previously discussed in class. In general, *elicits* and *prompts* as speech acts appeared far more frequently than did *informatives* and *comments* whose only function according to Burton (1981) is to provide information. As such, the instructor seemed to have relied on providing clues to jointly explore a solution to the
problem with the student rather than directly informing them of what to do. Edwards and Mercer (1987) consider cued elicitation as being part of scaffolded instruction in a process which aids learning in the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). Since it does not involve having information directly transmitted to learners, it may help in fostering learner autonomy. Similarly, Murphy and Jacobs (2000) assert that learner autonomy is achieved more quickly when guided cooperative learning processes are implemented.

Another major scaffolding function closely related to the cued elicitation characteristic of the instructor’s discourse during the writing conferences is part of what Mercer (1998) refers to as spiral IRF’s. Spiral IRF’s retain the traditional IRF (initiation, response, and feedback) moves which involve the instructor asking a question which is followed by a response from the learner and ends with evaluation by the teacher in the form of feedback. However, during the feedback stage, the instructor in spiral IRF’s does not evaluate student response but rather further questions the student to find out how the student arrived at the response in an attempt to get the student to reflect on the response given. Excerpt 1 shows how following the original elicitation in turn (23), the instructor’s feedback directly after each student response does not attempt to evaluate the response through the presence of speech acts such as acknowledges or accepts, for instance, which according to Burton (1981) function to indicate compliance. Instead, student replies are followed by further probing on the part of the instructor as is evident in turns (25), (27), and (29). All these turns are characterized by the absence of an evaluation or assessment component and involve probing questions that get the student to reflect on the response they had given and thus reach a closer understanding of the instructor’s vision of the writing problem. In that respect, instructor feedback plays more of a mentoring than assessment function, more quality enhancement than quality control. This speaks to the inherent difficulty in instructor response to student writing which attempts to incorporate the conflicting roles of an instructor in providing feedback on student writing which the instructor will ultimately come to assess (Hyland 2000). In their study, Greenbank and Penketh (2009) concluded that entering into a dialogue with students that encourages reflection allows instructors to become more aware of the values behind their students’ learning.

Focus 2

The second and more primary concern of the present study was related to examining the effect which interaction focused on fostering learner autonomy had on the L2 learner during feedback sessions on writing. The primary observation made in that respect centers around the importance of writing goals created by the L2 learners themselves at the end of
each writing conference, a byproduct of the feedback discussion carried out during each conference. These writing goals were found to be central in two respects. First, it was found that learner made writing goals are quite crucial in writing instruction since they are the ultimate expression of learner reflectivity, a criterion which as mentioned earlier, is borrowed from Little’s (2000) three principles of learner autonomy. The aim of all the writing conferences had been to stimulate reflection among learners. In all four writing conferences on which data was collected, the main outward form of expression for this reflective process came in the form of writing goals. According to Little and Dam (1998), the fact that such reflectivity results in better learning formulates the justification for learner autonomy from a pedagogical perspective. Indeed for Little (2003), learning is more effective when learners are reflectively engaged in learning processes. Hurd (2005) similarly considers reflection a primary component of learner autonomy.

Excerpts from the two conferences reveal how the learners displayed reflectivity by formulating their own writing goals after going through exploratory dialogue with the instructor. Table 1 below lists the writing goals which each student came to formulate at the end of the conference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>Student turn</th>
<th>Writing Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conference A</td>
<td>38. G S rep</td>
<td>I should add a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference B</td>
<td>40. N S I com</td>
<td>I need to stick to one main idea per paragraph/then choose from the table you showed us, any of them./and now I will choose the 3 best similarities that have enough information about to write details.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the retrospective self-reports confirmed these findings and went on to show that the goals which students formulated at the end of each writing conference were not only an outward expression of reflection on the part of students but also showed how accountable they felt towards their writing following the conference. Table 2 below lists some of the comments gathered from these retrospective self-reports which support this finding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gena (Conference A)</td>
<td>‘I liked this conference. Its better than just giving us back out papers with comments. Sometimes I don’t understand what I have to change.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naima (Conference B)</td>
<td>‘Now I know what I need to do to get a better grade on my writing.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These comments shed light on the fact that being self-formulated by students, these goals may actually be quite more potent in motivating students than are grades which are traditionally felt to be the most empowering source. Writing goals help remind learners that writing is their own creation so that only the learner and not the instructor can revise it.

Closer study of the student made goals above reveals another way in which these writing goals were found to be central. Not only were the goals an indication of reflection on the part of the learners, but when taken from a linguistic perspective, they also indicated instances of metalearning. The term for this, metalearning, is a term first coined by Biggs (1985) in relation to the condition whereby learners are cognizant of their learning and able to monitor and take control over that learning. The concept implies that the learner needs to have knowledge of how learning takes place; be motivated to deal with and manage this; and be able to regulate that learning (Jackson 2003). Excerpts 2 and 3 taken from Conferences A and B respectively will be used to demonstrate such metalearning.

**EXCERPT 2 (Conference A)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column 1 represents speech turns</th>
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<th>Column 3 represents the speech acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38. G</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>rep I should add a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. T</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>acct Ok..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. G</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>I want to do this for every body paragraph to make it more clear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. T</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>ack Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. G</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>I want to remind the reader what the thesis is in all the essay.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXCERPT 3 (Conference B)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column 1 represents speech turns</th>
<th>Column 2 represents the speakers involved in the discussion</th>
<th>Column 3 represents the speech acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40. N</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>I need to stick to one main idea per paragraph/ and now I will choose the 3 best similarities that I have enough information about to write details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>com</td>
<td>then choose from the table you showed us, any of them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After announcing her writing goal in turn (38), the student in Excerpt 2 above elaborates on this goal with planning in turns (40) and (42) where she reveals her plans on how to proceed with the essay. In a similar way, the student in turn (40) of Excerpt 3 also reveals her plan to choose supporting points that relate to each paragraph in an effort to meet the writing goal she had set for herself within the same turn. Such planning on the part of students involves an aspect of self monitoring because the students actually plan for ways to check performance. This may be considered a form of metacognition. According to Little and Dam (1998), planning along with self-evaluation are prerequisites for learner autonomy brought about when learners accept responsibility for their own learning. Thanasoulas (2000)
differentiates between self-monitoring which involves checking performance and self-evaluation which involves appraising performance while considering both along with planning three metacognitive strategies. Indeed, Hyland and Hyland (2006) highlight the fact that the ultimate goal of all instructor feedback is to create independent learners who are able to critically assess their own writing, and to do that, learners need to develop metacognition.

Table 3 below includes comments recorded by students on their self-reports which mirror the observation on metacognition identified above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Comment 1</th>
<th>Comment 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gena (Conference A)</td>
<td>‘At the beginning, I got really nervous because of all those questions. I felt like there wasn’t enough time to answer all the questions, but at the end I liked explaining my plan for revision because then I really understood what needs to be done. It’s different than just doing it.’</td>
<td>‘I learned that I need a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph. That makes the thesis important. I feel like I have learned something new.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naima (Conference B)</td>
<td>‘I know now that I need to have a topic sentence for each paragraph. If the example hadn’t been my own writing, I wouldn’t have understood as much as I did. Now I got a plan for what I need to do.’</td>
<td>‘I think the conference was good. I’m proud that I know what the problem is. I got to think about each paragraph to know that I have to stick to one main idea per paragraph.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In her 2nd comment, Gena may be said to carry out self-evaluation when she appraises her performance by saying that she felt she learned something new in the conference. Naima similarly carries out self-appraisal in her 2nd comment when she indicates that acknowledging her problem made her proud. These comments reveal information not only about the revision knowledge learned but also are also indicative of the skills learners have acquired through the conference. This shows that these learners may somewhat be considered cognizant of their learning processes. For Garrigan (1997), learners’ tendency to describe their learning in terms of factual knowledge without acknowledging indirect learning that they may experience on the side shows that they are not truly aware of the nature of their learning.

Finally, the main significance of this discursive exploratory pedagogical practice which aims at fostering learner autonomy lies in the fact that it sheds light on a frequently mistaken assumption among L2 instructors. More precisely, the instructor’s presupposition of the point at which the learner has truly understood the writing error needs to be revised. Analysis of the discourse in these writing conferences reveals that learners arrive at the instructor’s perspective of the writing revision and thus become cognitively engaged at a point much later than after they claim understanding of the revision being made. For Hyland
and Hyland (2006), it’s over-simplistic to assume that a target form becomes internalized by L2 learners after it has been pointed out through feedback. In what follows, Excerpts 4 and 5 from Conferences A and B respectively will be used to demonstrate this.

EXCERPT 4 (Conference A)
Column 1 represents speech turns
Column 2 represents the speakers involved in the discussion
Column 3 represents the speech acts
21. T S acct OK./
BO el So do you see what your problem is?
22. G S rep Uhm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Column 1</th>
<th>Column 2</th>
<th>Column 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>acct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OK./</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>rep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Uhm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this excerpt, the learner initially claims in Turn 22 to have understood the writing revision to be made after the instructor asks her whether she has understood the problem with her writing. Further probing on the part of the instructor, however, shows that it is not until Turn 38 that the learner truly grasps the nature of the writing revision to be made.

EXCERPT 5 (Conference B)
Column 1 represents speech turns
Column 2 represents the speakers involved in the discussion
Column 3 represents the speech acts
3. T S acct OK./
BO p So what’s the problem?
4. N S rep I think like I should make my ideas more related/ I add more detail.

Likewise, in this Excerpt, it may be mistakenly assumed that the learner in Turn 4 has arrived at the instructor’s perspective of the task. However, once again, further exploration reveals that the learner needs much further probing in order to understand the revision to be made in Turn 40. This observation is important in that it shows that students may claim understanding without actually having internalized learning. This prevents them from being able to apply learning to subsequent writing tasks hence generating frustration on the part of the writing instructor. As writers, they will need to engage in what may on the surface appear to be ‘blind’ student trying out behavior which is actually an indication of mental processing in order to internalize the instructor’s perspective of the task. This trying out behavior is actually what takes place through the discussion in each conference.
In his study, Ferris (2006) found that in comparison to direct feedback, indirect feedback has a greater effect on improving student writing ability over time. Such joint exploration of writing revisions thus acts to actively engage L2 learners allowing them to be cognizant of their learning while applying revisions to their writing. When students internalize their writing mistakes, this will improve their long term writing ability. For Thanasoulas (2000), taking an active approach to a learning task is one characteristic of autonomous learners.

At this point, it is insightful to comment on common pedagogical practices in writing classes and workshops which do not involve much joint exploration and either do not request students to formulate writing goals or at best assign them a peripheral role. It is often erroneously assumed that by merely providing feedback on writing prior to assessment, L2 learners will independently revise their errors internalizing the revisions and obtaining the instructor’s perspective of the errors in an autonomous manner. A sight common in a typical L2 writing class is that of students immersed in composing final drafts of their writing by copying from a previous draft that the instructor had previously revised and edited. To the frustration and disappointment of the instructor, this is frequently insufficient, and students often passively go through instructor feedback and apply comments to their writing in a mechanical process that usually does not involve active thinking about those amendments. Close observation of this process reveals few signs of active cognition on the part of L2 writers as these revisions are being made. Indeed for Knoblauch and Brannon (1984), when students follow instructor feedback too closely, they are simply rewriting work that reflects the instructor’s thoughts without developing cognitively. This is brought even more to light with regard to some of the questions usually addressed by L2 writers about feedback. In that context, the most frequently asked questions are often quite simple revealing the fact that L2 learners are more interested in getting through the task rather than thinking about the revisions to be made and their learning process. Adding to this, L2 instructors often observe that though learners may initially be capable of correcting an error based on feedback, they often regress back to the same error on successive pieces of writing. Indeed, Chandler (2004) holds that written instructor feedback may not produce the desired effect if students are not motivated to apply revisions to their writing. As indicated by Little (2002), once learners start working towards achieving autonomy, motivation becomes less of a problem.
Conclusion

This study has attempted to demonstrate from a linguistic perspective the presence of an attempt at fostering learner autonomy on the part of the instructor during writing conferences with L2 learners. It went on to examine the effect which such an interaction had on the L2 learners. The study shed light on how attempting to generate autonomy during discussions of writing revisions resulted in student self-composed writing goals which are important in 2 respects. Not only do such writing goals indicate evidence of reflectivity on the part of the learner, but they also revealed instances of metalearning. More importantly, the study showed that writing instructors may often mistakenly presuppose that learners have reached their perspective on a writing revision at a point much earlier than expected. This is often the reason for common frustrations amongst writing instructors when they witness learners passively making revisions in their writing without truly understanding the justification behind such amendments. Even worse, these learners very often regress back to similar errors on successive pieces of writing. As such, this study has hopefully shed light on the importance of establishing autonomy among learners. Since it combines well with revision on writing tasks, feedback may actually be one of the best areas for enacting learner autonomy.

It is not within the breadth of this study to evaluate the metacognition that ensues as a result of promoting autonomy during revisions on writing tasks, but it surely points to the fact that not ‘any’ instructional technique, even that which purports to instigate independence, may be considered a method for fostering learner autonomy. Nor can the degree of learner autonomy reached be measured; it is after all not a state which a learner reaches but rather a scale of varying degrees.

The for-mentioned discussion has been specifically related to the revision of writing. There are other areas worth studying in terms of cognitive engagement and the formulation of goals. These include areas related to editing. Not only that, but such a small scale study reports findings that are specific to a particular context. According to Kunschak (2005), implementing scaffolded instruction is a process that needs to take in several factors into consideration such as learner needs, instructional style, and curriculum constraints among many. More research into the area would certainly broaden our horizon on learner independence.
References:
Biggs, J.B. 1985. 'The role of metalearning in study processes'. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 55, p. 185-212.
Hyland, F. 2000. ‘ESL writers and feedback: giving more autonomy to students.’ Language Teaching Research. 4, 1: 33-54


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### Appendix 1: Notes on Coding Scheme

1. Column 1 represents the speech turns.
2. Column 2 represents the speakers involved in the discussion. Speech turns designated as (ALL) indicate that a majority of students in the class took part in the turn.
3. Column 3 represents the Moves using the following labels*:
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FR</th>
<th>Framing</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Supporting</th>
<th>BO</th>
<th>Bound-opening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FO</td>
<td>Focusing</td>
<td>RO</td>
<td>Re-opening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The above labels are taken directly from Burton (1981:69-72).

4. Column 4 represents the Speech Acts using the following labels*:
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>m</th>
<th>marker</th>
<th>con</th>
<th>conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sum</td>
<td>summons</td>
<td>accn</td>
<td>accusation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>^</td>
<td>silent stress</td>
<td>ack</td>
<td>acknowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>starter</td>
<td>ex</td>
<td>excuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ms</td>
<td>metastatement</td>
<td>pr</td>
<td>preface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>informative</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>el</td>
<td>elicitation</td>
<td>acct</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>directive</td>
<td>rep</td>
<td>reply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rea</td>
<td>react</td>
<td>com</td>
<td>comment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The above labels are taken directly from Burton (1981:76-78).

5. Speech Acts are separated by slashes.
6. Dotted lines mark exchange boundaries.
7. Double bold lines mark transaction boundaries.
Appendix 2: Transcripts

Conference A

T= teacher
G=Gena (student)

I. PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND EXPLORATION OF SOLUTION

1. T O s Looking at this essay/ el do you notice any problems with it?
2. G S rep Yeah./ I Maybe because it’s my first draft./ com It has a lot of problems to work on/
3. T S acct Yes./ BO s Looking at the body paragraphs,/ el how can you tell what each one is about?
4. G S rep Yeah./ I This paragraph is talking about one thing and the other one is talking about another thing.
5. T S acct OK./ el How can you tell?
6. G S rep Um, its about choosing words./ I Um, you just use some words to write your main point and explain it.
7. T S acct Yes./ BO el Can you figure out what the main idea is just by reading the paragraph?
8. G S rep Yeah
9. T BO p Is there something you can do to make it easier?
10. G S rep Um, yeah./ I You can add words.
11. T S acct Ok./ p What sort of words?
12. G S rep Specific words/ ms like if I was talking for example about like here (refers to essay) I'm talking about education, I'd go ahead and talk about school, talk about like teachers and friends./ I You know, just write about things that relate to the main point of the paragraph.
13. T O el So what is the topic sentence of this paragraph (refers to the 2nd body paragraph in essay)?
14. G S rep Um, this paragraph talks about like from a learning perspective how they see the difference between high school and university.
15. T BO p In terms of?
16. G S rep In terms of how causes, how its the teaching.
17. T S acct Umhm./ BO p So, well in terms of education?
18. G S rep Umhm.
19. T S acct OK./ BO el Wouldn’t it help if you explain that to the reader at the beginning of the paragraph?
20. G S rep Yeah.
21. T S acct OK./ BO el So do you see what your problem is?

II. RELATION TO PREVIOUS LEARNING

23.T O m OK./ el So what is the problem you have in your essay?
24.G C rep Um^
^ (hesitates)
25.T RO s From the stuff that we talked about in class,
III. PINPOINTING THE PROBLEM

35. T O m Now./
    O el do you know what the problem that you have to work on is?
36. G S rep Yeah.
37. T C p What?
38. G S rep I should add a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph.
39. T S acct Ok.
40. G S I I want to do this for every body paragraph to make it more clear.
41. T S ack Yeah.
42. G S I I want to remind the reader what the thesis is in all the essay.
43. T S ack OK./

Conference B

T= Teacher
N= Naima (student)

I. PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND EXPLORATION OF SOLUTION

1. T FO m OK./
    O el Is there something wrong with your paragraphs?
    P Can you change something?
2. N S rep Um, yes./
    I It’s a little messy.
4. T S acct OK./
    BO p So what’s the problem?
5. T BO s So if you take this paragraph (points to paragraph)
    I add more detail.
6. N S rep Um, like everything is from different places.
7. T S acct Umhm./
    I You have many different ideas together.
8. N S ack Yeah./
    FO con So it doesn't really make sense.
9. T S ack Yes./

II. RELATION TO PREVIOUS LEARNING

FO m OK, good./
    ms If I take this back to the stuff we talked about in class,
O el what is that related to?
10. N C el What do you mean?
11. T S rep What you felt was wrong with your essay./
RO p What’s the problem with having a lot of different ideas in a paragraph?
12. N C el Yeah?
13. T RO s Its related to something when you were planning this essay./
p What was it?
14. N S rep Um, it was the Venn Diagram.
15. T S acct The Venn Diagram./
BO s In the Venn Diagram./
el what did you have?
16. N C ms I don't remember.
17. T RO m ok/
I you had details.
19. T BO el But what did you do to those details?/
p What were you supposed to do in the paragraphs?
20. N S rep Um, put like everything that’s the same together.
21. T S acct Yes.
22. N S I But here I didn't do that.
23. T S ack Yes./
I They were all mixed up.
25. T BO el So you kind of didn't use the Venn Diagram?

III. PINPOINTING THE PROBLEM

27. T O m Well./
el How can you fix this?
28. N S ms I think/
rep When I write one difference, I should only concentrate on it/
I and it all connects to each other not from different parts.
29. T S acct OK./
BO el So how would you do this?/
p Using something you have done before.
30. N C el Something I did before?
31. T RO rep Think of the Venn Diagram./
32. N S I I choose one difference to talk about it.
33. T S ack Uh huh.
34. N S I And add details to it.
35. T S m OK./
con So you organize your information./
BO el How would you do that using the Venn Diagram?
36. N S rep Um, with the Venn diagram.
37. T S acct Umhm./
I which you already have.
38. N S ack OK.
39. T S ack Yeah.
41. N S I I need to stick to one main idea per paragraph/
com then choose from the table you showed us, any of them./
com and now I will choose the 3 best similarities that I have enough information about to write details.