

# Enriching Our Understanding of Written Corrective Feedback

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## INTRODUCTION

While providing corrective feedback may not be an L2 teacher's favorite job, most of us spend a great deal of time responding to student writing in hopes of helping students write more accurately. Some teachers believe that they are expected to provide their L2 learners with written corrective feedback and assume that their learners benefit from the feedback they provide, even if some scholars have questioned the efficacy of error correction and have vigorously debated the value of error correction in L2 writing pedagogy.

In the 1980s, researchers started to investigate teacher commentary on student writing (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Sommers, 1982; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982). Response to student writing has since then become a research concern for many writing specialists over the last few decades. Much attention has been devoted to the efficacy and value of teacher written feedback in SLA and L2 writing. Despite the negative pronouncements of research (e.g., Krashen, 1982; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007), L2 teachers continue to spend enormous amounts of time and energy on written feedback (Lee, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2014;

Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). For most writing teachers, the question is how to provide feedback effectively.

As an L2 writer, I remember many red ink marks and underlining with question marks. As an L2 writing teacher, I have experienced the burden and overload of marking and struggled with providing sufficient and detailed feedback to student writing in a timely manner. As a teacher educator, I have noticed the ineffectiveness of current feedback practices. Due to my experience in multiple roles, instead of offering another experimental study in an already well-researched area of L2 writing, this paper will delve into the existing research and commentary about written feedback in order to ferret out the implications and will provide pedagogical recommendations to increase the efficiency and quality of written feedback.

## PROLIFERATION OF STUDIES ON WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

In SLA and L2 teaching research, written corrective feedback, also known

as written feedback, teacher written commentary, error correction, or grammar correction, has been a controversial topic for decades. Since Truscott (1996) argued that grammar correction was ineffective and harmful and should be abolished in L2 writing instruction, a heated debate on the value of written corrective feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999) was launched. Quite a proliferation of studies on various questions surrounding response to student writing has also been generated (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010; Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Goldstein, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Knoblauch & Brannon, 2006; Sommers, 2006; Straub, 1999, 2006). Some studies (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009; van Beuningen, de Jong, & Kuiken, 2008, 2012) have shown that students with corrective feedback focused on specific grammar structures performed better on the targeted structures in new pieces of writing, compared to the text produced by students who did not receive feedback. Other studies investigated whether corrective feedback can help learners revise their texts and can benefit L2 development over time. Truscott and Hsu (2008) found that the benefits of corrective feedback were short-lived.

Students benefitted during the immediate revision process, but this did not carry over to new pieces of writing or enhance students' overall writing skills. In contrast, Van Beuningen et al. (2012) reported written corrective feedback led to improved accuracy in both revisions and new pieces of writing.

Interestingly, over the last 18 years, the value of corrective feedback is still under debate; even more ironic, the gap between research and real-world practice continues to exist.

### Factors inference the effectiveness of written feedback

Evans et al. (2010) introduced three variables that influence effectiveness: learner, situational, and methodological. Learner variables consist of learners' L1, cultural identity, motivations, beliefs, attitudes, learning styles, and many additional individual differences. As Odlin (1989) noted, similarities of two languages may enable Spanish speakers to more easily master writing in English than speakers of Asian languages. Language distance plays an important role here. According to Guénette (2007), "They [high school students] wrote to pass the exam or to please me, but very few were genuinely interested in improving their writing skills, just for the sake of good writing.... If the students are not committed to improving their writing

skills, they will not improve, no matter what type of corrective feedback is provided” (p. 52). Learners’ attitudes and motivation toward written feedback may cause them to not intend to comments and corrections on their writing, and they may even choose to devalue or ignore teacher feedback. In addition, learners’ language proficiency, knowledge of grammar, and lack of linguistic awareness may mean teacher feedback is all in vain (Ferris, 2006).

Situational variables account for factors that shape the learning context. These include curriculum guidelines and objectives, class sizes, frequency of class meetings, the physical environment, the learning atmosphere, political and economic conditions, teacher workload and teacher variables, such as teacher training, teaching philosophy, teaching experience, and personality. Ferris (2006), for instance, observed that teacher differences led to significant variations in L2 writers’ performance. Methodological variables include the design of instruction and what is taught and how it is taught. As Evans et al. (2010) argued, “Even the highly motivated learner, for example, may miss the potential benefits of WCF [written corrective feedback] when instructional methodologies or activities lack appropriate sequencing, effective pacing, or adequate practice and repetition, or when students are overwhelmed with so much feedback

that they cannot adequately process or learn from it. We should identify what should be corrected, how it should be corrected and how often” (p.6).

By incorporating these factors, practitioners should be able to develop techniques and resources that are sensitive to learner variables, look for situational variables that facilitate learning, and determine the most effective instructional methodology to help students apply what they learn from teacher feedback to the subsequent writing.

### Directive feedback vs. indirect feedback

A number of researchers have investigated whether direct feedback is more effective than indirect feedback. Some found no differences between the two approaches (Frantzen, 1995; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986); others reported direct feedback was most effective (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b; Chandler, 2003; Van Beuningen et al., 2008); yet others stressed the value of indirect CF (Ferris, 2006; Lalande, 1982).

Direct written corrective feedback, as the name suggested, occurs when teachers mark the errors and provide explicit correction. It includes clearly marking the errors and providing correct linguistic forms or structures, crossing out unnecessary words or phrases, inserting missing words or connectors, and referring to grammar rules

or commonly used examples. It also includes one-on-one student-teacher conference and whole class discussion (of frequently made mistakes). On the other hand, indirect feedback involves calling errors to learners' attention but not supplying any corrections. Teachers underline or circle the error, or use codes to show the type of the error, and then learners need to solve the problem themselves.

In SLA research, direct feedback is viewed more influential for the acquisition of targeted structures over time since it efficiently provides clear information about the targeted structures (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; van Beuningen et al., 2012). Ferris and Roberts (2001) reported that direct feedback was effective in helping learners to revise their errors. Furthermore, Chandler (2003) stated learners with poor writing proficiency can benefit from clear and explicit corrections. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) and Van Beuningen et al. (2012) both noted direct and indirect feedback were equally effective. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) further claimed only direct feedback had a sustained effect, while Van Beuningen et al. (2012) reported only direct feedback helped to improve grammatical accuracy significantly. Farrokhi and Sattarpour (2012) echoed these significant gains in accuracy, particularly in the use of English articles in a new piece of writing.

On the other hand, indirect feedback is

considered more valuable for the long run in terms of the writing development (Ferris, 2006). Indirect feedback "requires pupils to engage in guided learning and problem solving and, as a result, promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, p. 415). Lalande (1982) argued that indirect feedback led to long-term development of writing ability due to its nature of requiring learners to figure out the corrections.

### Focused correction vs. unfocused correction

Some researchers (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Sheen, 2007) investigated the effects of focused correction, whereby written corrective feedback only targeted one specific error type at a time. Ellis et al. (2008) suggested that when focusing narrowly on one grammatical feature, learners are more likely to notice and understand the corrections. If the target feature was prioritized based on learners' developmental readiness, as espoused by SLA cognitive theory, this approach can be most useful. For learners with limited writing abilities, such an approach can reduce the attention load on their processing capacity (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

While a focused approach may improve accuracy on targeted grammar features, in real L2 writing, learners need to work on a

variety of language features simultaneously to develop overall writing accuracy and possibly self-editing skills (Evans et al., 2010; Ferris, 2010). Van Beuningen et al. (2012) argued unfocused correction, which generally means providing comprehensive feedback on all errors noticed, better fits pedagogical practice as “a teacher’s purpose in correcting his/her pupils written work is to improve accuracy in general, not just the use of one grammatical feature” (p. 6). Likewise, Evans et al. (2010), in their classroom-oriented study, addressed a wide range of errors simultaneously and stressed the value of a comprehensive and manageable feedback that is returned to students promptly.

### Feedback and mediated learning experience

Derived from Vygotsky’s theory of zone of proximal development, another approach called mediated learning experience aims to improve learning. According to Feuerstein et al.’s study (1988), three criteria must be met in order to qualify as a mediated learning interaction: (1) intentionality/reciprocity, (2) transcendence, and (3) meaning. Within the framework of feedback in writing, intentionality refers to “the teacher’s deliberate effort to mediate feedback for students, directing their attention to the strategies needed to solve their problems in writing (e.g., deliberately magnifying

particular stimuli, sharpening certain focuses), as opposed to the conventional unfocused or haphazard manner in which feedback is delivered” (Lee, 2014, p.204). Reciprocity involves both teachers’ and learners’ active participation in the feedback process. Transcendence reflects that teacher feedback enables learners to transfer learning from one feedback situation to another. Meaning refers to “the significance of the interaction, achieved by the teacher helping learners interpret the significance of the task and what they have accomplished in writing, mediating a sense of achievement. Feedback that provides [a] meaningful learning experience is, therefore, able to help students understand their strengths and weaknesses in writing and what they can do to close the gaps (i.e., improve the weaknesses) in their writing” (Lee, 2014, p.204).

### PEDAGOGICAL VALUE IN L2 WRITING CLASSROOMS

Since Truscott’s (1996) argument for the ineffectiveness and potential harm of error correction, research on the effectiveness of corrective feedback has been fiercely debated. This article has reviewed previous studies of the effects of corrective feedback on SLA and L2 teaching. It does not advocate any specific set of techniques to solve the conundrum. Rather, it explains the theoretical basis of the concept and provides examples for teachers to better understand

the potential feedback has as a powerful tool to help learners develop writing abilities.

As an L2 writing teacher, my interest lies in its potential relevance to classroom teaching and the possibility of changing instructional orientation. As a teacher educator, I would like to contextualize corrective feedback in second language writing pedagogy (that is, help teachers integrate written feedback in their instructional context) and maximize the pedagogical value of written corrective feedback.

### Current practice in teaching English writing in Taiwan

Although third grade is officially mandated by Taiwan Ministry of Education as the first year to start learning English, many children begin to learn English before entering elementary school. The elementary school classes meet for 40 minutes one to three times each week, depending on the policy of each county. The primary focuses of English learning at the elementary school level are listening and speaking, whereas reading and writing receive much more attention in secondary school. In terms of writing, children's lessons range from word recognition and alphabet/vocabulary spelling to sentence copying. Most teachers use direct feedback to mark student errors and make students copy the correct answer multiple times.

In junior high, English classes meet three to four times each week, with each class lasting for 45 minutes. Writing at this level focuses more on the sentence level and short paragraphs. Students are normally required to do drill-like writing exercises listed in the textbook or worksheets provided by their teachers. Answers are often checked during class time either by students themselves or by their peers.

In order to get to college, high school students are required to take the scholastic ability test after they finish their fifth semester. If students are not satisfied with the test results, they can take the college entrance exam in July. Both exams have English tests, in which multiple choice questions are worth 72 points and the translation and composition writing sections are worth 28 points. Students with upper-intermediate proficiency perform similarly on the multiple choice questions. Therefore, their performance on the writing section becomes crucial in determining the final score on the exam, and setting one student apart from another. In order to help students gain higher scores and to maximize practice for the exam, most teachers attach great importance to comprehensive and timely error feedback. That is, teachers respond to all errors and provide explicit corrections in a quick turn around. Interestingly, despite the great effort on the part of the teacher in providing detailed error feedback, students



are not required to rewrite the compositions, but rather are required to practice new pieces of writing for the exam preparation.

At college, students are required to take freshman English, which covers the four main language skills, with writing receiving the least emphasis. English writing, except for English majors, is an elective course. Since instructors teaching at colleges do not require a Ministry of Education-issued teaching certificates like those of elementary and high school teachers, it can often be difficult to find qualified teachers. In addition, it can often be a challenge to find instructors willing to take on the task of teaching writing courses. As Hsu (2010) reported, “.... when it comes to teaching such a writing course, few upper level faculty shoulder such responsibilities, and most tend to relegate this task to lower-level faculty or colleagues in the English Department/Writing (Language) Center.... Although the writing experience accumulated while finishing doctoral degrees may have made them more competent and accomplished writers, the lack of specific training to deal with the issues in student writing development and the overwhelming pressure for promotion compel them to pass on the burdon to part-time writing instructors” (p.2). Even though most schools now offer various incentives for teachers to take on the writing classes, such as teaching a 2 credit course which is counted

as a 3 hour teaching load, most teachers are reluctant due to the lack of special training in teaching writing and/or the overwhelming essay grading tasks.

Compared to high school product-oriented writing classroom, college writing courses place more value on the students’ writing process and self-correction practices. That is, students have opportunities to revise their writing. During feedback, some teachers prefer to work on students’ global errors (i.e. content) first, and then move on to the local errors (i.e. grammatical features) in the following draft. The interaction between students and teacher are often realized in the form of student-teacher conferences.

### Pedagogical implications of previous written feedback studies

As Hyland (1998) noted “‘good’ feedback can only really be defined with reference to the individual writers, their problems, and their reasons for writing” (p. 275). Identifying learners’ needs, attitudes, and preferences for written feedback presents teachers with the immediate challenge of designing feedback practices that are useful, effective, and manageable in their unique teaching contexts. Instead of giving all errors the same attention and marking all essays in a similar manner, teachers are urged to assess learners’ attitudes and motivation toward written feedback. Furthermore, teachers could tailor their responses based on learners’ language proficiency and linguistic

awareness. More importantly, teachers are encouraged to perceive response as a formative tool that helps learners to develop writing skills rather than as an evaluative mechanism in order to simply score student writing. In that sense, the process-oriented approach is encouraged. Through multiple drafts and through interaction with teachers over written commentary, learners are actively involved in the learning process and are more likely to transfer what they learned from feedback on one writing assignment to another writing assignment. Awareness-oriented techniques, such as keeping an error log, can also encourage learners to be more proactive in their self-analysis of their language learning needs and make greater use of teacher feedback.

If feedback is tailored to learners' needs and preferences, learners can benefit from instruction and attend to language forms. If learners receive constant encouragement from their teacher, feedback can be motivating. Teachers should remind learners that making errors is a natural process in language learning. If learners are trained to make sense of feedback and have enough time to revise and apply the teacher's comments and corrections, feedback would be beneficial to the development of self-editing skills.

As part of a teacher's challenge in designing feedback practices, the instructor has to decide how much direct and indirect feedback to use. Whereas direct feedback

involves marking and correcting the error, indirect feedback only points out that an error has been made by underlining or coding the errors. No provision of correct forms is made; learners are left to correct errors on their own. For advanced learners, indirect feedback is sufficient; for learners with no explicit knowledge of a grammatical feature or limited linguistic repertoire to draw on, direct feedback is more helpful. For learners with low writing proficiency, a focused approach (which targets only one or two linguistic forms or structures) is more effective since it can reduce the attention load on their processing capacity. For classroom teaching, an unfocused approach (which provides feedback on a comprehensive range of forms and structures) is generally practiced. In terms of types of errors, treatable errors such as subject-verb agreement and third person singular only need indirect feedback because learners can reference rules to self-correct. For less treatable errors, such as word choice and more complex grammatical structures, which require learners to use acquired knowledge to make corrections, direct feedback is needed.

The writing classroom and the task of guiding students toward better writing does not need to be a struggle or a painful, time-consuming task. By using the results of research, teachers can arm themselves with the best feedback practices for their teaching situation. First, teachers need to



understand who their learners are, especially in terms of their needs, their attitudes toward writing, and their proficiency level. In exam-oriented classrooms, such as high schools in Taiwan, focusing on direct and comprehensive feedback on a single draft (meaning no rewriting) is understandable but not recommended. However, even with the stress of passing the college entrance exam, teachers could still manage to provide direct and focused feedback especially to learners with poor writing proficiency, who would benefit from clear and explicit corrections. Such feedback, which narrows in on one or two targeted features at a time, can enable learners to instantly internalize the correct form. Indeed, focused correction is considered to be pedagogically sound. Teachers can vary the feature(s) they focus on in each writing assignment. By doing so, a wide range of grammar can be covered over time. While the benefits of focused, direct feedback for less proficient writers are clear, it may be less clear that similar benefits can also be found using indirect feedback for more proficient writers. For more advanced learners, indirect feedback engages students in a more profound form of language processing and can promote deeper cognitive engagement. This can help them to monitor their writing autonomously in the long run. Finally and more important than what kind of feedback a teacher uses, interaction between the student and the teacher is absolutely necessary.

Regardless of the learners' proficiency level, conferencing with the teacher about their writing and discussions with the teacher about the writing process are beneficial to all learners. Indeed, the use of multiple drafts in this writing process benefits both teacher and student, allowing teachers to tailor and target feedback and students to concentrate on only a few areas in each draft.

## CONCLUSION

After decades of debate over the effectiveness of written corrective feedback, it is time to embrace this issue with a more pedagogical view. Rather than arguing for a particular form of feedback, this article encourages teachers to contextualize research findings within the framework of learner, situational, and methodological variables and put mediated learning experience theory into practice. More importantly, there is no one best approach for written feedback. The ultimate goal of all the research presented in this paper, hopefully, is to center on how to help learners write better and develop stronger self-editing skills, and also to provide teachers with the techniques to best accomplish this. With that end in mind, this paper has focused on identifying which feedback practices work best with different learners under different situations, and on providing teachers with useful insights for the writing classroom.

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