Review of the Effectiveness of Written Corrective Feedback in an ESL Context

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Abstract: While written corrective feedback (WCF) has frequently been identified as a common teacher practice in teaching writing in an L2 classroom, ESL teachers pay little attention to the effectiveness of it. The role of written corrective feedback (WCF) in English as a second language context has been a controversial topic among instructors as well as researchers. Although WCF is a widely used, and is a common pedagogical tool in second language (L2) classroom, there are a number of practical and theoretical objections to its effectiveness in writing classroom. This review is to shed light on the debate on the effectiveness of WCF in the ESL writing classroom. It will summarize the theoretical arguments underpinning the use of WCF in L2 classrooms. That is, the objections raised against WCF are reviewed, and some concerns of different WCF types are also discussed.

Over the last few years, the role played by corrective feedback in language acquisition has become a highly controversial issue. In the field of First Language Acquisition (FLA), researchers express strong reservations concerning the effect that negative evidence has on FLA, if there is any at all. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), however, there appears to be a growing consensus among the majority of researchers concerning the significance of the role played by negative evidence in the process of SLA. This literature review will focus mainly on the role played by corrective feedback in SLA. While corrective feedback clearly relates to both oral and written discourse, the focus of this discussion will center on oral production, since the preponderance of research has largely focused on this aspect. In the following sections of this review, the meaning of corrective feedback will be discussed, and the different theoretical stances towards its role in SLA examined. Empirical studies that explore the impact corrective feedback has on SLA will be reviewed, followed by a discussion of some of the issues that loom large in research in the area of corrective feedback and its role in SLA.

Index Terms: SLA, WCF, FLA.
1. Introduction

Feedback refers to a generic sense of different procedures that are used to inform a learner if an instructional task is right or wrong (Kulhavy, 1977). Feedback occurs when two different parties are engaged in an instructional procedure in which one side is viewed as the knowledge giver and the other as the knowledge receiver (i.e. output and input). This does not mean that knowledge flows in one direction – from giver to receiver; rather, it flows in both directions with variance in the amount. This notion contributes to Han’s (2001) study in which he concluded that feedback is a two-way interdependent process, involving the giver and the receiver, where both are information providers. Nevo (1994) says that even teachers benefit from their peers’ and principles’ feedback and evaluation to improve their own teaching performance. The feedback receiver can also argue and positively interact with the feedback he or she receives. Hattie & Timperley (2007) define feedback as a consequence of performance, and as information provided by an agent regarding one’s performance or understanding of instructions. In other words, feedback is employed to reduce discrepancies that occur between current understandings and performance, and a goal. Feedback allows for a comparison between one’s actual outcome and a desired outcome based on standards of performance (Mory, 2004). Feedback occurs more often when there is one correct form, action, or performance that the feedback provider wants to see. In general, the feedback provider is not only an instructor or peer, but can also be a parent, self, book, and/or experience. An instructor’s or peer’s feedback can help learners correct information, whereas a book can help you clarify ideas. Parents’ feedback might provide you with both information and encouragement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The recent definitions of feedback are not different from the ones presented in early 1900s. Kulhavy and Wager (1993) mentioned that feedback is viewed as a motivator, and provides a reinforcing message that would connect responses to prior stimuli, and provides information for learners to use in their previous responses. The question here is whether feedback is viewed as information or as reinforcement. The argument of this dichotomy is not a result of recent studies, but goes back to the 1900s. Reinforcement feedback refers to the act of telling a learner that his or her answer is correct and, therefore, she or he is reinforced to answer correctly on the next task. The feedback here targets the correct responses rather than wrong ones. In contrast, the feedback as information argument suggests that it provides learners with information to correct or change their previous responses. Mory (2004, p. 747) thinks that both ways are examples of “open-loop versus closed-loop”. Open-loop does not provide error-correction mechanisms, while close-loop provides ways of correcting errors. This dichotomy is considered the foundation of the current divide among researchers (e.g. Truscott 1996, 1999; Ferris, 1999, 2004) on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language acquisition (SLA). The two research camps will be discussed later on this paper.

2. Written feedback in second language writing

Written feedback in L2 writing provides information that help learners fill the gap in their knowledge and techniques of writing. It bridges the gap between what learners composed on their writing tasks and how the composition should actually be. This can be done in a number of different ways including restructuring sentences, providing a correct word, crossing out unnecessary words, underlining, adding a word, and so on. The definition of feedback is viewed under many different situations and settings, but, in the educational research field and SLA, it is perceived as an instructional procedure given to inform a learner of the accuracy of a learning task. It is important at this point to identify various terms of feedback in the literature of SLA. There is a number of terms used in identifying feedback including ‘written feedback’ (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008, 2009; Cramp, 2011; Cardelle & Como, 1981; Elawar & Como, 1985; Glover & Brown, 2006; Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Lee, 2008; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Sheen, 2007; Zellermay, 1989), ‘corrective feedback’ (Ellis, 2008; Ellis, Loewen, and Erelm, 2006; Ferris, 2010; El Tatawy, 2002; Han, 2001; Havranek, 2002), ‘error correction’ (Hendrickson, 1978; Lee, 2005; Truscott, 2007), ‘teacher response’ (Ferris, 1995), and ‘error feedback’ (Chandler, 2003; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Lee, 2003; Liu, 2008). Although there are disagreements about these
terms (Ferris, 2010), most of these terms are used interchangeably in the literature (Lee, 2004). Feedback not only occurs to correct a wrong action, information, or performance, but it can also occur to confirm the correct ones (Mory, 2004; Cardelle & Como, 1981). Feedback may not refer to one specific form, but it can refer to written form, oral form, or praise and criticism form. Feedback can take a form of praise, which can effectively suppress learner errors. Praise is only given for correct work or performance. On the other hand, others may use criticism as a feedback. Criticism, though there are possible motivational effects, is only given to errors or wrong performance (Cardelle & Como, 1981). Oral feedback is similar to written feedback in that both focus on form and content. However, Sheen (2007) states a number of differences between oral and written feedback:

- Written feedback is delayed whereas oral feedback is immediate. For instance, an instructor may not write his response immediately after an error occurs, but he or she may orally immediately respond to an error right after it has been committed.

- Written feedback requires less cognitive load on memory than oral feedback does. This requires an immediate cognitive comparison, which pushes learners to use their short term memory.

- Written feedback requires different pedagogical processing than oral feedback. Learners process written feedback differently from oral.

- Written feedback usually focuses on improving the content and organization of learners’ writing, while oral feedback draws learners’ attention to erroneous utterances in communication. Yet, it can also support the written feedback in improving the overall quality of writing.

Written feedback in second language writing had not occupied much of the research until the mid-1990s. Only few studies (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Cardelle & Como, 1981; Hendrickson, 1978; Kepner, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986; Saito, 1994; Semke, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985) were conducted during this period of time, because writing extensively in the L2 was not a priority for learners or practitioners. Therefore, L2 learners were not motivated to consider teacher feedback on their writing. There were other reasons beyond the neglect of written feedback such as audiolingualism theory and Krashen’s SLA theories (Ferris, 2010; Hendrickson, 1978).

3. The effectiveness of WCF in the ESL writing classroom

Written feedback has been a controversial topic in second language writing since the mid-1990s. The effectiveness of written feedback remains a controversial topic, though the gap has slightly decreased in recent years. A number of the researchers (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995, 2006; Lee, 2008; Sheen, 2007) conclude that it does help improve learners’ writing accuracy. These studies are valuable in a way that they provide evidence about relative effects of different types of written feedback; however, they fail to provide any evidence of the effects of correcting to not correcting. Bitchener (2008) argues that all studies claiming the effectiveness of written feedback on learners’ writing are not accurate because most of them did not include a control group to make a comparison between those who received written feedback and those who did not. When measuring only one group, the effectiveness, if any, cannot be interpreted as a result of teacher written feedback as there are other factors involved in the learning procedure. Ferris (1999, 2004) and Truscott (1996, 2004) agree that studies that fail to make comparison between control groups and treatment groups do not provide evidence of the effectiveness of the written feedback.

Earlier research (Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985) concluded that written feedback given by teachers was vague and mostly consisted of negative comments. They think that teacher written
feedback provides nothing but confusion, takes learners’ attention away from the lesson, and teachers misinterpret learners’ meanings, and therefore, it should not be used. Zamel (1985) argues:

ESL writing teachers misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text. (p. 86)

However, other studies (e.g. Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001) pointed out the importance of building an interpersonal relationship between learners and their teachers through written feedback; and at the same time they emphasized that teacher written feedback should be clear, text-specific, and include praise and criticism through teacher-learner interaction. The ongoing debate for the last 15 years has shown that the majority of L2 learners think that written feedback can improve their writing, and they want to be corrected regularly (Farris, 1995). The debate on whether or not giving written feedback to L2 writers is effective and helpful was more intense between Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007) and Ferris (1997, 1999, 2004). Truscott, in his controversial review article (1996), strongly criticized written feedback. He dismissed error feedback as not only useless, but also as harmful to learners’ writing accuracy and, therefore, should be abolished. Truscott (1996) argues that teachers should look more seriously at the problems correction feedback creates. He claims that:

- research supports his objection of feedback,
- the lack of effectiveness is expected,
- correction has a negative impact on learners, and
- any research arguments to keep error correction lack merit.

These claims are supported by previous studies (Hendrickson, 1978; Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985), which suggested that correction had little or no effect on learner writing. Kepner’s (1991) study examined the effectiveness of two types of written feedback and concluded that the consistent use of L2 teachers’ written error correction was ineffective in L2 writing, no matter what level of proficiency learners have. Liu (2008) points out some weaknesses in this study. He argues that the consistent use of message-related comments used in Kepner’s (1991) study was effective for improving overall quality and surface-level accuracy. Liu (2008) also points out that learners were not required to produce a new draft using the teachers’ corrections, which engages the learners into self-editing. Farris (1999) responded to Truscott’s (1996) claims and described them as premature. Ferris first identified three main problems with the research reviews that Truscott used in his paper:

- No comparison between subject groups in the previous studies.
- The paradigms and teaching strategies in these studies are different.
- Truscott ignores other research results that contradict his claims.

However, Farris (1999) agrees that error correction will not help learners if they are not dealt with carefully. Another criticism to Truscott’s claims is the loose definition of the terms. In his article’s title, he used ‘grammar correction’, but he did not specify what kind of grammatical correction he was trying to disapprove. Grammar rules vary according to their features. Some functional uses of grammar have rule-based features while others do not. The effectiveness of grammar correction depends to some extent on the kind of grammatical rules to be corrected (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). For instance, a study on ‘definite article’ errors might give different results from another study on the use of ‘models’. Therefore, it is not accurate to generalize the effectiveness of error correction of one kind of grammar rule over the others. Truscott tried to
apply the effectiveness of the grammar correction over all kinds of feedback without considering the positive impact the teacher comment might have on learners. Ferris (1996) concludes that Truscott’s claim of eliminating this pedagogical practice that helps learners to improve their writing accuracy is incomplete and has no conclusive evidence.

Truscott (1999) responded to Ferris’ response. He argues that Ferris’ (1999) criticisms were “unfounded and … in some cases, even strengthening them” (p. 111). Thus, he agrees that there are some varieties of correction in which one cannot make grammar correction in general, and that some corrections have more problems than others. He adds that the claim of evidence of good correction is not meaningful. As a response to the variation of the research subjects, he says that when a finding emerges from a number of different studies, that finding must be taken seriously and generalized. Chandler (2003), though, showed that teacher feedback on grammatical errors resulted in a significant improvement in both accuracy and fluency; which disproves Truscott’s (1999) claims that error feedback has a negative effect on fluency. In 2007, Truscott presented another review article in which he included new research studies (Bitchener et al, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006) to the same old studies that he used in his 1996 study. His conclusion was less strong than it was in 1996. He concluded that error correction has small benefits, and has only small harmful effects on learners’ ability to write accurately. The inclusion of new studies that have qualitative analysis and quantitative meta-analysis of their findings has slightly changed his position on the effectiveness of written feedback. This can be an indication that his position might completely shift if more recent studies were included. A number of recent studies on written feedback in L2 writing has shown that teacher written feedback does improve accuracy over time (e.g. Hyland, 2003; Chandler, 2003). Hyland (2003) conducted a study for 14 weeks. In the study, she observed six ESL writers in a full-time English program course. She concluded that some language errors may be treatable through feedback, and that learners highly valued feedback focusing on form. Lee (2005) also concluded that 75.7% of the study participants wished that their teachers would correct all errors for them, whereas only 21.8% of them wished their teachers to correct some errors.

4. The effectiveness of different WCF types

In order to better understand the effectiveness of written feedback on L2 learners, it is important to dig deeper into the types of feedback that teachers use in treating which type of error. Some studies (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener et al, 2005; Bitchener, 2008) most often view feedback as either direct (explicit or overt) or indirect (implicit or covert). Most studies have made a distinction between direct and indirect feedback strategies (Ellis et al, 2006; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Bitchener et al, 2005; Chandle, 2003 ). Direct feedback is the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure by the teacher to the student above the linguistic error (Ferris, 2003). Indirect feedback is used to point out the error that a learner has made without actually providing the correct form (Ellis, 2008). In fact, both types of feedback occur when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form, but the variation occurs on how the teacher responds to the error. Ferris (2002) describes direct feedback as a response in which “an instructor provides the correct linguistic form for students” (p. 19). This linguistic form may include crossing out of unnecessary words, phrases, or morphemes; inserting a missing word, phrase, or morpheme; or the provision of the correct form or structure. Bitchener and Knoch (2008) even include written meta-linguistic explanations and spoken meta-linguistic explanations under direct feedback. Meta-linguistic explanation includes the provision of grammar rules and examples at the end of student work. Spoken meta-linguistic explanation includes mini-lessons where rules and examples are explained and practiced individually or in small groups. However, Ellis (2008) made a distinction between direct feedback and meta-linguistic feedback. He categorizes the feedback as follows:

- Direct feedback: providing the correct form.
- Indirect feedback: indicating that an error exists but not providing correct form.
- Meta-linguistic feedback: providing error codes or grammatical description.
- The focus of feedback: correcting either all or some of the errors (focused vs. unfocused).
- Electronic feedback: providing a hyperlink that provides examples of correct usage.
- Reformulation: this consists of a native speaker’s reworking of students’ entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original.

As mentioned above, research studies most often categorize feedback into ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’; therefore, the discussion in this current paper will use these two types, though Ellis’ 2008 categories are appreciated. The second feedback type is ‘indirect. Ferris (2002) describes indirect feedback as the one that “occurs when the teacher [implicitly] indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error” (p. 19). In other words, teachers use this type of feedback to draw learner’s attention to the error and let them find it out. It can take the form of underlining, circling, coding, or recording in the margin the number of errors. Coding is different from the other in that it provides learners with the type of error (e.g. ‘WW’ for wrong word, or ‘Art’ for article).

Farris and Roberts (2001) compared these two types of indirect feedback and they found that those who received both underlining and coding in revising their grammatical errors outperformed those who received only underlining. In general, both groups have shown a significant improvement when compared with the control group who received no feedback. Chandler’s (2003) study, though, has shown that direct feedback in which learners are given the correction with simple underlining is more effective. Chandler also noted that using direct feedback works best in producing accurate revision, and that learners preferred direct feedback. Bitchener et al., (2005) examined the effect of two types of feedback on three types of errors (prepositions, the past tense, and the definite article). He concluded that there was a significant positive effect of the combination of written and oral feedback in the use of the past tense and definite article. These findings were supported by a recent study by Bitchener (2008) in which he found that those who received feedback in the use of the indefinite and definite articles outperformed those who did not receive feedback. The two studies indicate that if direct feedback is focused on specific types of errors, findings will more likely result in positive effects. Focused feedback is when teacher feedback focuses on specific types of error (i.e. intensive), instead of correcting all errors (i.e. extensive) (Ellis, 2008). This was supported by Bitchener and Knoch (2008) who investigated the effectiveness of targeting only two functional error categories with written feedback in order to find out if such focused approached would be helpful for ESL writers. They concluded that those who received written feedback on two functions outperformed the control group in all four post-tests. Sheen (2007) also reached the same conclusion that written feedback targeting a single linguistic feature improved learners’ accuracy. When learners receive written feedback on various types of errors, they might lose track of them as a result of shifting from one language layer to another (e.g. lexical, grammatical, semantic, so on). This can be really difficult and tiring for both teachers as well as learners at the low language proficiency level.

Studies suggesting that indirect feedback is more effective than direct feedback argue that indirect feedback engages learners in guided learning and problem-solving and, therefore, promotes noticing and attention that foster long-term acquisition (Ferris and Roberts, 2001). Chandler (2003), however, says that three main arguments are in support of direct feedback: first, direct feedback is more helpful to learners as it reduces the confusion that might occur if learners do not understand what the feedback is for or what the feedback is saying. This might occur sometime after it has been given. Direct feedback provides more linguistic descriptions that help learners to understand and remember the error later time during school year. For instance, indirect feedback uses codes; learners might forget their meanings and references a few weeks after feedback has been given, which is particularly problematic; if learners try to review materials from last year. A second argument supporting direct feedback is that it provides learners with sufficient information and explanation to resolve more related-to issues (e.g. different usage, idiomatic usages). This way, learners not only benefit from correcting the error itself, but also
they learn other things. For instance, if a learner uses 'reply' instead of its synonym 'answer' in 'John replies the phone', the direct feedback not only will provide the correct word, but it will also provide an explanation of when each word is used along with examples. The third argument concerns the belief that feedback provides learners with more immediate feedback on hypotheses that they may have made. Learners receive feedback on their writing not only on the syntactic and grammatical errors, but also on semantic errors including contradiction, coherence, and ambiguity. These types of errors require an immediate direct written feedback with a possibility of accompanying oral feedback.

Studies that investigated the effectiveness of different types of feedback can be viewed according to the kind of comparison. Many studies point to an advantage for direct over indirect corrective feedback (Carroll and Swain, 1993; Ellis et al., 2006; Rosa and Leow, 2004). Some other studies (Lalande, 1982; Carroll, 2001; Carroll and Swain, 1993; Ellis et al., 2006) compared direct and indirect types of written feedback. Those two studies concluded that there is an advantage to using indirect feedback. Other studies (Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984) concluded that there is no difference between direct and indirect feedback, while Chandler (2003) concluded that there are positive findings for both direct and indirect feedback. On the other hand, those who compared the effectiveness of different types of indirect feedback (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Robb et al., 1986) found no difference between the indirect types (i.e. coded and uncoded) and direct types of written feedback.
References


