

Treating Errors in Learners' Writing: Strategies of Written Corrective Feedback

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the concepts concerning errors and error types and synthesizes previous research related to written corrective feedback. Furthermore, the paper acknowledges the limitations and challenges associated with WCF, such as the time-consuming nature and potential misalignment between students' preferences and teachers' practices. To address this issue, the paper provides several teaching suggestions based on a comprehensive literature review. The strategies proposed include considering the timing and frequency of WCF, tailoring WCF to learners' individual needs and abilities, and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of WCF. The paper emphasizes the crucial role of providing WCF that is both constructive and motivating in nature. This type of WCF not merely aims to rectify errors in learners' writing but also serves as a catalyst, inspiring them to embrace responsibility for their own learning process and actively strive for improvement.

Keywords

Writing errors, error correction, written corrective feedback, English writing, strategies.

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language means learning both language aspects (i.e. grammar, vocabulary) and language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing). Writing is a fundamental output skill in acquiring a second language and also plays a significant role in second language teaching. However, errors in writing are a common occurrence, especially for learners who are still in the process of acquiring a new language. Error correction is also the key that contributes to student success in second language learning (Ellis, 2009). Therefore, both teachers and students consider error correction important in second-language teaching and learning. Furthermore, as English teaching and learning have developed, the topic of written corrective feedback has gained substantial research attention, with scholars worldwide engaging in extensive discussions on this issue.

One question previous researchers endeavor to figure out is whether providing corrective feedback helps improve students' writing ability. Some notable authors (Krashen, 1984; Trustcott, 1996) argued that providing corrective feedback is not helpful and error correction should be abandoned. However, Ferris (1999, 2011) suggested that grammar correction is necessary for second language writing acquisition and instruction. Furthermore, Bitchener (2012) found that written corrective feedback can assist learners in controlling the specific linguistic structures they are aiming to learn. The next logical question to ask is what some efficacious approaches to responding to student written errors are. The effectiveness of written corrective feedback depends on various factors, including the techniques used by teachers to provide feedback, the learners' proficiency level, and their motivation and engagement in the writing process.

This paper aims to explore the strategies of written corrective feedback and how they can be effectively implemented in English writing. Additionally, the paper delves into the importance

of providing constructive and motivating feedback that not only highlights errors but also encourages learners to take ownership of their learning and make improvements. By understanding the techniques and principles of written corrective feedback, teachers are expected to provide more effective support to learners in their writing journey, ultimately leading to improved writing skills and a deeper understanding of the language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Related Concepts

The following are some concepts related to the paper: errors and error types, definitions of written corrective feedback, and types of written corrective feedback.

2.1.1. Errors and Error Types

Linguists have conducted extensive research on errors made by learners in the process of second language acquisition. Based on their research, previous scholars have proposed different concepts and perspectives on this issue. Corder (1967) believed an error is a noticeable deviation, which reflects the limit of the learners' competence who have not mastered L2. As the significance of errors is becoming more widely recognized among scholars, a proliferation of studies on errors has emerged. According to Ellis (1997), errors represent a gap in the learner's knowledge, while mistakes are occasional lapses, which need to be eliminated. Errors are inevitable occurrences that arise due to various reasons, especially for non-native English speakers who are deeply bound to their social and cultural backgrounds (Li, 2021).

To facilitate learners in enhancing their writing skills, researchers have organized written errors into broad classifications. According to Lee (2004), 19 errors were pinpointed in students' essays, ultimately categorized into six primary types: word choice, noun ending, spelling, punctuation, verb tense, and article usage. Different from Lee, Ferris (2006) summarized 15 categories into five general categories in analysis, which were verb errors, noun errors, article errors, lexical errors, and sentence errors. While Ferris (2011) proposed that rule-governed linguistic elements like subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and capitalization are not classified as untreatable errors, but rather as technical aspects that can be addressed through instruction, in contrast, "idiosyncratic features" such as unconventional word choice or non-idiomatic sentence structures are considered as errors that may be more challenging to rectify. More specifically, Fitrawati & Safitri (2021) mentioned nine types of writing problems students encounter: word choice, tenses, word usage, definite articles, relative clauses, redundancy, spelling and punctuation, and sentence level.

2.1.2. Definitions of Written Corrective Feedback

Chaudron (1977) was the first one who defined the term corrective feedback known as negative feedback. Corrective feedback was defined as the teacher's reaction to students' performance, such as the teacher's explicit identification and correction of students' writing errors, or the request for refinement of the writing works. More specifically, Truscott (1996) argued that corrective feedback is grammar correction to improve learners' writing accuracy. While according to Ellis (2006), corrective feedback is defined as the response given to learners' utterances that contain errors. It can be summarized that corrective feedback generally includes both oral corrective feedback and written corrective feedback.

Written corrective feedback is defined as "a written response to a linguistic error that has been made in the writing of a text by a second language learner," which can either be direct or indirect (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). Additionally, Lee (2019) contended that written corrective feedback is used by teachers to address linguistic mistakes in students' writing assignments and to help improve their writing accuracy.

2.1.3. Types of Written Corrective Feedback

Written corrective feedback is classified into different types.

Ferris (2004) distinguished written corrective feedback into direct and indirect forms. Furthermore, Ellis (2009) classified writing corrective feedback into six different types, which are direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback, metalinguistic corrective feedback, focused corrective feedback and unfocused corrective feedback, electronic corrective feedback, and reformulation. Direct corrective feedback entails presenting the accurate form of the language being addressed, whereas indirect corrective feedback merely signifies an error has been made without specifying the precise correction. On the other hand, focused written corrective feedback emphasizes only a select few linguistic errors, whereas unfocused feedback addresses a broader spectrum of errors. Research investigating the effects of various feedback types has yielded mixed results, with focused feedback demonstrating a higher degree of writing accuracy compared to other types.

2.2. Previous Studies on Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

The efficacy of written corrective feedback on improving second language writing has been controversial over the past three decades. Trustcott (1996) found that corrective feedback is not helpful and argued for the abandonment of grammar correction in writing classes. On the contrary, Ferris (1999, 2011) asserted that corrective feedback helps students improve writing assignments and acquire accuracy in writing. In line with Ferris, Sheen (2007), Bitchener (2008), and Ellis (2008) found that WCF could enhance students' performance in new writing tasks. Furthermore, Wan Mohd Yunus's (2020) study revealed that both students and teachers generally believe that WCF is beneficial in improving students' writing skills. It was also discovered that students prefer direct, specific, and comprehensive feedback over indirect feedback. Besides, Dong and Gao (2022) reported that more in-depth and meticulous research on WCF can be carried out from three aspects: constructing a theory of feedback literacy, expanding the scope of research objects, and enriching empirical research methods.

As for different types of WCF, every type of WCF has its advantages and drawbacks. Reinders & Mohebbi (2018) found that direct WCF has the potential to reduce confusion among students, particularly those with lower proficiency levels. Additionally, it could prove to be a more efficient means of addressing complex errors in students' writing. While L2 teachers are urged to give indirect WCF because it engages L2 learners in cognitive problem-solving (Ferris, 2004). Moreover, Chen and Gong (2022) showed that both direct and indirect feedback are effective in the short term but less effective in the long term; indirect feedback is slightly more effective in the short term, while direct feedback slightly promotes the long-term retention of the correction. In terms of focused WCF and unfocused WCF, Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) contended that unfocused WCF (Written Corrective Feedback) offers a more authentic approach compared to focused WCF. Conversely, Sheen, Wright, and Moldawa (2009) viewed unfocused WCF as an unorganized method for rectifying learners' written errors, which might lead to an excessive cognitive load for L2 learners, affecting their attention and working memory capacities.

Several research showed that error correction in written assignments has several shortcomings. Wan Mohd Yunus (2020) summarized that there was a misalignment between students' preferences and teachers' practices in composition classrooms in terms of the amount, type, and necessity of the feedback where most students were found to require more WCF than the amount their teacher was capable of giving. In addition, Hendrickson (1980) said that direct written corrective feedback is time-consuming and it may hinder the development of students' writing skills. Additionally, WCF is complicated because of the number of papers and assignments teachers have to correct and the presence of multiple problems such as spelling and grammar that inhibit students' ability to express themselves (Taniguchi, 1990). Moreover,

students may feel frustrated and unappreciated for their corrective feedback, especially students with lower levels.

Therefore, further investigation is needed to enhance the implementation of more efficient WCF in second language learning classrooms and furnish practical advice for educators administering WCF.

3. Strategies of WCF Taken to Treat Errors in Learners' Writing

Strategies of implementing written corrective feedback (WCF) to treat errors in learners' writing involve a multi-faceted way that aims to improve both the accuracy and quality of learners' written output.

3.1. Considering Timing and Frequency

The teacher should take timing and frequency into consideration when providing written corrective feedback.

Miao and Yao (2023) concluded that with the advancement of online technology, the advantages of immediate written corrective feedback in English writing have gradually become apparent. It significantly increases interactions between teachers and students, enriching the content of writing assignments and fostering more profound discussions. Moreover, it helps learners retain the information better because the connection between the writing task they performed and the feedback received is fresh in their minds. This promotes learning by reinforcing the correct actions and identifying errors that need to be corrected right away. Immediate feedback also encourages learners to take action swiftly, as they are still in the mindset of completing the writing task. Alternatively, delayed written corrective feedback, which involves learners receiving comments or evaluations after a substantial delay, possesses its unique benefits. It grants learners the chance to contemplate their work and make an attempt at self-correction before obtaining formal feedback. This process of self-reflection fosters the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

In addition, the frequency is another significant factor that influences the efficacy of written corrective feedback. Li and Sun (2019) found that consistent and regular feedback, entailing continual interaction with learners throughout the learning process, is pivotal for effective learning outcomes. It enables learners to monitor their progress and receive timely guidance at crucial stages. Regular feedback offers learners a sense of purpose and motivation, guiding them towards achieving their learning objectives. Furthermore, it allows educators to promptly identify and address any issues or misconceptions, thereby preventing them from escalating into more significant challenges.

In summary, the timing and frequency of feedback play critical roles in the learning process. Immediate feedback reinforces learning and promotes swift corrections, while delayed feedback encourages self-reflection and allows for the tracking of progress over time. Frequent feedback, meanwhile, keeps learners engaged and motivated, enabling them to track their progress and make continuous improvements. The optimal approach often depends on the context, the learners' needs, and the nature of the learning material.

3.2. Tailor Feedback to Learners' Needs and Abilities

Individualized feedback means that the type, amount, and complexity of feedback are customized to each learner's unique strengths, weaknesses, language proficiency, and learning goals. This strategy ensures that learners receive feedback that is relevant and meaningful to their specific learning process. Ye and Xiang (2023) reported that when offering personalized feedback, teachers must take into account each learner's current proficiency level and adjust the feedback accordingly. For instance, a novice learner might require simpler and more direct feedback, whereas an experienced learner could benefit from more intricate and detailed

feedback. Furthermore, the quantity of feedback should be proportional to the learner's needs, with learners who need more guidance receiving more frequent feedback.

Progressive feedback is also crucial in customizing feedback to learners' needs. As learners progress and develop their skills, the complexity and depth of the feedback should gradually increase. By providing increasingly challenging feedback that matches the learners' improving abilities, teachers can encourage learners to reach higher levels of proficiency. This method ensures that learners remain engaged and motivated, while also receiving feedback that is tailored to their current level of proficiency.

In summary, tailoring feedback to learners' individual needs and abilities is vital for fostering effective learning. By delivering personalized and progressive feedback, teachers can empower learners to achieve their goals, strengthen their strengths, and overcome their weaknesses.

3.3. Monitor and Evaluate the Effectiveness of WCF

Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of WCF is a crucial step in ensuring that learners are making progress and that the strategies being employed are effective. This process involves regularly tracking learners' progress and making adjustments to the feedback strategies as needed.

One way to monitor learners' progress is by regularly reviewing and comparing their writing samples over time. This can help identify patterns in their performance and highlight areas where they are making improvements or struggling. For instance, teachers might track changes in accuracy, fluency, and complexity to see if learners are becoming more proficient in their writing skills. When learners are making substantial advancements, educators may opt to enhance the intricacy and thoroughness of their feedback to further stimulate their growth. This approach fosters the development of learners' abilities and enables them to attain higher levels of mastery.

In essence, the practice of assessing and refining the effectiveness of feedback is a continuous and repetitive cycle. By consistently examining learners' progress and adjusting their strategies as necessary, teachers can guarantee that learners receive the tailored support and direction required to accomplish their educational objectives. After assessing learners' progress through monitoring and evaluation, teachers should modify their feedback strategies to better cater to learners' individual needs and achieve the intended learning outcomes. For instance, if learners encounter difficulties with a specific concept, teachers can offer more focused and detailed feedback to assist them in overcoming those challenges. Conversely, when learners demonstrate substantial progress, teachers can consider enriching the complexity and depth of their feedback to push learners to new heights.

To conclude, the ongoing process of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of written corrective feedback is cyclical and iterative. By consistently reviewing learners' progress and adjusting feedback strategies accordingly, teachers can ensure that learners receive the tailored support and guidance necessary to accomplish their learning objectives.

4. Conclusion

Through a thorough literature review, the paper highlights the significance of written corrective feedback (WCF) in improving students' writing abilities and the mixed opinions that exist among researchers on its effectiveness. It also acknowledges the limitations and challenges associated with WCF, such as the time-consuming and the potential for misalignment between students' preferences and teachers' practices. Based on the literature review, the paper identifies several key strategies for implementing WCF effectively in the English classroom, including considering timing and frequency of feedback, tailoring feedback to students' needs and abilities, and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of WCF. By

adopting these strategies, teachers are expected to provide students with constructive and motivating feedback that not only corrects errors but also encourages students to take ownership of their learning and make improvements.

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