# A Review and Analysis of the Literature on the Effectiveness of Teacher Feedback on Higher Education Students' Development of Language Use in ESL Writing

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*Abstract:* This article outlines the debate in the research literature about error correction and feedback in English language teaching (ELT). It presents a rationale for this review and analysis of literature on the on the effectiveness of teacher feedback on higher education students' development of language use in ESL writing. Emphasis will be given to the impact of corrective feedback on grammar use in English language writing. This discussion in the article will be organized around the following research question:
*In what ways can teacher feedback on language use in ESL writings improve students' English language writing?*
*Keywords:* Error correction, Teacher feedback, English language teaching

## 1.Issues with the research on corrective feedback and ESL writing

Bitchener et al. (2005) proposed two main reasons for the limited evidence indicating the effectiveness of error correction One reason is that as error correction as it is typically practised is unhelpful for students. They argue that this is because most feedback tends not to take into account the progressive and complex process of acquiring the form and structure of a second language in Second Language Acquisition theory. Another reason is that teachers give students a series of practical problems related to their ability and willingness to accept error correction. On this basis, Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) argue that discounting grammar correction in L2 writing is not useful, and is in fact harmful, as feedback on errors can help accuracy with certain types of grammar errors.

According to Ferris (2004) the research on error correction in second language writing is less concerned with "comparing the writing of students who have received grammatical corrections over a period of time with that of students who have not received grammatical corrections". In fact, many studies have compared the effects of different kinds of error correction methods. However, due to the professional ethics of many teachers, the comparison of "error correction" and "no error correction" in L2 students' writing is very rare.

Because of the inconsistency of research design, the data obtained between research study and research study is basically incomparable. There are many differences between the various error correction studies on almost all parameters. Such as research level (including without limitation in ESL students, American college foreign language students and EFL students), scale of research samples, duration of research, types of writing, types of feedback, feedback provider, definition of errors, the way to improvement of measurement accuracy (Ferris, 2004).

The difficulty in comparing research findings in this area to find a common pattern is presented in a table by Ferris (p. 53, 2004). The summary of four studies is given (Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross & Shorteed, 1986; Semke, 1984). These four studies are comparable. They are all vertical comparisons (from a 10-week quarter to a nine-month academic year). The number of subjects is controlled in a similar range (from 60 to 141).The subjects studies are foreign language students rather than ESL students (Spanish and German foreign language students in American universities; EFL students at a Japanese university). The disparity between the research findings is emphasized by the four very different major findings in each of the four research studies selected for comparison by Ferris (2004).

A comparison of four studies

| Study | Kepner (1991) | Lalande (1982) | Robb et al. (1986) | Semke (1984) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of subjects | 60 (two groups) | 60 (two groups) | 134 (four groups) | 141 (four groups) |
| Duration of study | One semester | One quarter | Academic year | One quarter |
| Context | Spanish FL students at U.S. university | German FL students at U.S. university | EFL students at Japanese university | German FL students at U.S. university |
| Main research question | Differences between groups receiving error correction or message-related comments | Differences between groups receiving direct or indirect correction | Differences across groups receiving four types of error correction | Differences across groups receiving four types of comments/corrections |
| Control (no error feedback) group used? | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| Pretest/posttest design? | No | Yes | Yes | Yes, but pretest results not reported |
| Type of student writing studied? | Journal entries | Essays | Essays | Journal entries/freewrites |
| Type of posttest measure? | Journal entry written at home | Posttest | Essay written in class | 10-min freewrite in class |
| Who provided error feedback? | Researcher | Four classroom instructors | Two classroom instructors | One instructor, spot-checked by researcher |
| What type of error feedback was provided? | Not specified | Direct versus indirect | Direct and three different types of indirect | Direct and indirect |
| Were error types or categories specified? | No | Yes | No | No |
| Was revision after correction required? | No | Yes (experimental group only) | Yes | Yes (one group only) |
| Major finding | Error correction group made 15% fewer errors than other group; progress over time not measured | Indirect feedback group made more progress in accuracy over time | All groups improved over time; no major differences across treatment types | No significant differences in accuracy across treatment groups; progress over time not measured |

Therefore, as identified by Ferris (2004) because research on the same specific aspect and context of feedback on writing has not been repeatedly researched it is difficult to make it make assertions about the influence of feedback on grammar errors in ESL writing. The result is that whether error feedback is helpful to L2 students' writing is still uncertain, because so far there is a lack of both similar controlled and longitudinal research. It could be suggested that there is a greater need for a sustainable, systematic and replicable way to study this problem, which is easy to control variables. Ferris (2004) suggests that in evaluating error feedback generally it is still yet to be established "where are we in grammar correction" (p. 50).Ferris (p.49, 2004) further asserts that the research on error correction feedback in writing is restricted to 'predictions' about what future research might discover, rather than 'conclusions' about what the previous research shows us".

In very general terms the research literature does propose that error feedback can be helpful under appropriate conditions and in certain contexts. Error feedback is therefore possibly necessary and effective for teachers and students who are inclined to it (Ferris, 2004). It is important to consider what can be said with some confidence, based on current research, about the appropriate conditions for feedback on errors in ESL writing.

## 2.Conditions identified in research for error correction in ESL writing

Error handling, including teacher's error feedback, is an important part of second language writing teaching. In the process of teaching, teachers should make full preparations, plan and implement the curriculum carefully. In most cases, teachers should provide indirect feedback to enable students to participate in cognitive problem solving and to prompt them to engage in self-editing based on the feedback received. However, this may not be appropriate for students with lower L2 proficiency who do not have adequate self-correcting language skills. To analyze and clarify different types of errors is also important, different types of errors may require different treatment methods. After receiving feedback, students should revise (or at least self-edit) their texts, preferably in class, where they can benefit from the support of peers and mentors. If complementary grammar teaching is driven by students' needs and combined with other aspects of error handling (teacher feedback, charts, etc.), supplementary grammar teaching (in class or through personalized self-learning materials recommended by lecturers) can promote the progress of accuracy. It is better for students to maintain error charts themselves under the guidance of tutors, which can improve students' understanding of their weaknesses and improvements (Ferris, 2004)

Amara (2015) recommends based on an analysis of SLA insights and studies of error correction that different types of language errors should not be viewed and responded to in the same way, because they represent different areas of language knowledge. In addition, these different areas of knowledge are formed at different process and at different stages of language learning. Bitchener et al's 2005 study found that the significant impact of the accuracy of using different language categories in investigators' new writings was due to the type of feedback they provided.

In Diab's (2015) research study on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback it was noted that the type there was a significant increase in the accuracy of grammatical (rule-based) errors with the use of direct meta-linguistic feedback. A key outcome of Diab's (2015) research it is important that FFI (form focussed instruction) courses provide students with clear knowledge to apply to FFCF. It is difficult for students to recognize and understand their errors without clear guidance. Diab's (2015) research also interprets the purpose of FFCF in

supporting students' focus on their language errors. It may cut down the ability for their focus. Moreover, this study also clarifies the significance of error correction, especially in reflecting on errors and clarifying the meaning of knowledge. According to the research results, although cognitive and skill-based theories provide a reasonable explanation for the learning process involved in the development of language skills, self-confidence, as an affective factor, plays a pivotal role in the process of constructing linguistic knowledge Although lack of self-confidence does not prevent the development of language, Diab's (2015) research found that it can slow the development of language to a certain extent. This study is of great practical significance to writing teachers. First, the study helps teachers focus on specific language forms and explains why students acquire one type rather than another. However, it is important to note that the study only completed a small sample analysis and did not investigate students' individual differences in more detail, which led to the limitations of the study.

## 3.Research on impact of corrective feedback on students' writing

In Corrective Feedback in Second Language Classrooms, Leonardo Veliz (2008) tries to analysis and survey the role of corrective feedback in the interaction between teachers and L2 students in a classroom and discusses the effects of recasts on students' self-correction. Leonardo undertook a research survey about the topic. Ten students of two different groups from English Teaching Training Program at university who were taking English courses at an intermediate level and advanced level were studied. In this article, the point at issue was a consideration of whether feedback is harmful and ineffective or essential and rather effective. Veliz (2008) focuses on whether recasts are noticeable for students to 'read between lines' and figure out the underlying correction.

Although Veliz (2008) concentrated on corrective feedback in speaking, some useful findings were produced about corrective feedback in general in his research. Veliz (2008) stated that feedback can become less effective if teachers use inconsistent and ambiguous approaches to feedback. This suggests that it is not only the student's ability to learn from feedback which is important: it is also the teacher's ability which can also influence how effective the feedback is.

In Bitchener, Young and Cameron's research study in 2005 they focused on the effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing. Their study involved 53 students, of varying nationalities and ages, enrolled on a post-intermediate ESL programme. They divided these students into three groups; one group received direct written feedback and had a 5-minute meeting with their teacher, the second group just received direct written feedback and the third group received no corrective feedback. In their analysis of the influence of the different types of feedback they found that the short meeting combined with the direct written feedback had a much greater effect on students' accuracy than written feedback on its own. In particular, this combined approach had a very positive effect on more rule-governed linguistic features, such as correcting the past simple tense (Btichener, Young and Cameron, 2005). These findings seem to suggest that feedback approaches such as Form Focussed Corrective Feedback might help with ESL writing accuracy. With regard to accuracy in writing, it has been noted by Bitchener et al (2005) that L2 learners, in the course of acquiring new linguistic forms, may finish them with accuracy on one time but fail to do so on other similar times.

According to Bitchener et al (2005) Truscott's 1996 research on error correction on ESL writing and his finding that it has little impact because error correction is not surprising. Bitchener et al (2005) argue that error correction as it is typically practised ignores research in SLA about the complex and incremental process of acquiring the forms and structures of a second language. Moreover, he claimed that error correction is harmful because it diverts time and energy away from the more productive aspects of a writing programme. Not surprisingly, these claims have since generated a considerable amount of vigorous debate at international conferences and in published articles. Ferris (2004) had a more positive view of the effectiveness of error correction on ESL writing. Ferris (2004) claimed that a selective, prioritised, clear and effective error correction can and does help at least some student writers.

## 4.Discussion and Conclusions

Grammar correction in ESL writing has always been a controversial topic in the field of teaching. It is undeniable that, as a teaching strategy and cognitively, error correction does help students at all levels to identify and correct grammatical errors, and in some cases, it can also play a good role in consolidating students' grammatical knowledge.Each kind of corrective feedback has its advantages and disadvantages. It will show its unique advantages and disadvantages and adaptability in different situations. This is determined by many factors, such as teaching environment, teachers' level and the students' level. The review and synthesis of literature undertaken has indicated that it is very effective to improve ESL students' English writing proficiency if both students and teachers can correctly choose the feedback method under the corresponding circumstances. On the contrary, if improper feedback methods are chosen, some ESL students' English writing level will be reduced, and students' confidence in English learning may be reduced, thus causing a vicious circle.