

Written Corrective Feedback: Issues and Implications

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Abstract: This paper reports findings from a study that looked at how teachers provide written corrective feedback (WCF) on students' writing, and what students do with teachers' WCF in the university EFL context of Japan. Teachers' and students' perceptions on WCF were also investigated. Questionnaires for teachers and students with open and closed questions were used, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Altogether sixty students from two different proficiency levels and six teachers participated. Results showed a strong preference for WCF on all grammar errors among teachers and students. However, there is a lack of consensus in the WCF methodologies used by teachers, and only a limited range of WCF methods were used. Most students made use of teacher's WCF in subsequent writing, but only a minority believed that they could learn from WCF. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications that arise from the study.

Key words: written corrective feedback, English as a Foreign Language, direct error feedback, indirect error feedback, error codes

1. Introduction

With the advance of technology, approaches to providing written corrective feedback (WCF) in students' writing have changed dramatically over the years. Despite these changes, WCF has remained an essential element in writing courses, especially when learners go through a multiple-drafting process (Keh, 1990). Studies have found that when teachers provide feedback on students' writing, not only would students have a higher motivation to revise their drafts but also improved the accuracy in their writing more over time (McGarrel & Verbeem, 2007; Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003). Given the wealth of studies that looked at different methods of WCF (Robb et al., 1986; Ashwell, 2000; Muncie, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener et al., 2005; Hamid, 2007; McGarrel & Verbeem, 2007), very little work has focused on how teachers and students practice WCF and their reactions to it in the EFL context of Japan, where grammar errors are severely frowned upon in a testing-oriented learning environment. This study aims to examine the beliefs and attitudes teachers and students in a Japanese university context have towards WCF by addressing the following questions:

- (1) How do teachers give WCF on students' grammar errors?
- (2) What are teachers' perceptions on WCF?
- (3) What do students' do with teachers' WCF in their writing?
- (4) What are students' perceptions on WCF?

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2. The Study

This study looked at six writing classes of two proficiency levels at a Japanese university in Japan. Altogether, 60 students and 6 teachers teaching these classes in the school of Science and Technology participated. Two questionnaires were used. The ones for teachers was written in English, and the ones for students was in English and Japanese. Both were designed and piloted with a small group of teachers and students through personal contact, then revised and finalized.

All teachers were native speakers of English, and all of them had seven to ten years of experience in teaching English writing. Three teachers were teaching first year students, and three were teaching second year students.

For the teacher's questionnaire, qualitative data were summarized and categorized. Quantitative data were analyzed by totaling the number of answer options selected. Students' responses were tabulated and calculated into percentages for each answer. Similarly, qualitative data were summarized and categorized.

3. Results

3.1 Teachers

Four teachers reported that they give WCF on all grammar errors regardless of the different levels they were teaching. In addition, teachers gave similar reasons for adapting this WCF strategy because the consequences for students not knowing errors are adverse such as failing exams or affecting their ability to publish academically in their field of study. All four teachers also mentioned that they believe it is their job to point out all errors, therefore; even though they find it extremely time-consuming and tiring to give WCF on all errors, they still do it.

Only two teachers reported that they provided WCF selectively, but for different reasons. One teacher said that marking all errors is too time consuming for teachers and demotivating for students, and does not enhance students' self-correcting skills. When asked about the major principles for selecting errors, their responses also varied. One teacher said the errors selected were directly linked to the current instructional focuses in class, while another teacher said errors were selected on an ad hoc basis.

In terms of the type of WCF, the most frequently used WCF strategy was indirect feedback where three teachers reported that they always or often indicated the location of errors explicitly by underlining or circling without telling students what kind of errors they were. Two teachers said they gave WCF by categorizing errors using a coding system. They believe that it is important in terms of learner training, such as mentioned by one teacher: "I find that by showing the location of the errors and explaining the type of error with correction symbols, my first year students improve their writing. By the time they are second year students, they have more experience with writing and editing." Teachers who used error codes believe that it is important for learners to become more independent in terms of correcting and editing their own writing. Therefore, it is crucial for students to think about their own errors before correction. One teacher said, "I rarely give students correct answers because I want them to think about errors, but I tell them what kind of errors they've made in the writing."

Only one teacher directly corrected students' errors for them because of the confusing nature of error codes: "I have found in the past that marking with codes and lines creates a puzzle to be solved, and that can sometimes be difficult for students and so demotivates them, or if they do solve it, they have focused on the solution, and not on the error, so the error is not undone and they just repeat the error again." All teachers also mentioned that they always actively encourage the learners to ask questions with regards to teacher's WCF, either during class time or

outside class time. Two teachers said that they set aside time after class every week for student and teacher conferences to clear any queries students have towards WCF. However, teacher also mentioned that students are not very proactive in raising questions even when they are confused.

When teachers were asked to reflect on the overall effectiveness of their current error feedback practice on students' progress, most teachers had positive comments. Four teachers thought their students were making "good progress". One teacher considered students making "some progress", while only one teacher thought the students were making "little progress" in their grammatical accuracy in writing.

3.2 Students

Almost all students (92%) said they preferred teachers giving WCF on all their errors for similar reasons. They believe that errors in writing have severe adverse effects on their academic study or later career, therefore; must be avoided altogether. Students also considered it teacher's job to detect errors for them because they are incapable of doing it alone. Only 7% of all students preferred teachers giving WCF on selected errors because they think too many corrections is demotivating and impossible to rewrite. Overall, 81% students think positively towards the use of error codes, they think it's efficient and easy to understand. Only 8% of students think they are confusing and only creates more problems.

94% students considered teachers' WCF effective and reported using the WCF in further re-writing tasks as they go through a multiple drafting process because it is required for their course. However, only 7% of students reported benefiting from the rewriting tasks because they believed they could learn from their errors.

4. Discussion and Implications

One limitation of the study was the small sample size, meaning that the results cannot represent the whole population in Japanese universities. Secondly, participants' viewpoints were based on self-reported statements rather than actual writing samples. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study uncovered a number of key issues regarding WCF in the Japanese university EFL context.

The findings suggest that both teachers and students considered errors in writing extremely negative, and preferred WCF on all errors. They consider WCF important in language learning, which is in line with Ferris' argument and supports the idea that WCF should be continued.

However, teachers need to consider whether to give WCF on all errors or only on selected errors. Ferris pointed out the effectiveness of selective error feedback: "when it focuses on patterns of error, allowing teachers and students to attend to, say, two or three major errors types at a time, rather dozens of disparate errors" (Ferris, 2002, p. 50). Teachers working in contexts where errors have significant adverse effects such as passing entrance exams, and where tests are high stakes need to re-examine their methodology in going about WCF. If selective WCF benefits students more in the long run, it is important for teachers to discuss their WCF policy amongst themselves, and to share any problems or concerns they might have. In addition, when error codes are used in WCF, care must be taken so that the coding system is systematic amongst teachers so as to avoid confusion. This also points to the importance of having a consistent teacher training programs at the school level if possible, where teachers working in the same context can share and unify their WCF methodologies and error codes, and to regularly discuss the effectiveness of their ongoing WCF practice.

Lastly, the study also showed that teachers' tend to take on too much responsibility in providing WCF, and that teacher's WCF strategies are only limited to either direct or indirect feedback methods. This again points out

the need for a more regular and consistent in-service teacher training program to be put in place, so that teachers can be more confident in trying out different WCF strategies. Teachers need to be made aware of the importance of learner-training, so that students can become more independent in detecting and correcting their errors. Similarly, students need to rely less on teachers for error identification and correction. Activities such as peer-editing and self-check lists can be used more to promote learner autonomy.

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Appendix I

Teachers' questionnaire

1. How long have you been teaching English writing?
2. What proficiency level are you currently teaching?
3. In your opinion, what's the main purpose of providing written corrective feedback on students' writing?
4. Which statement best describes your existing written corrective feedback strategy?
 - a) I give written corrective feedback on ALL students' grammar errors.
 - b) I only give written corrective feedback on students' grammar errors SELECTIVELY.

In one or two words, briefly explain why you use the above feedback strategy.

5. Which of the following best describes your written corrective feedback strategy?
 - a) The errors I select are directly linked to the current instructional focus in class.
 - b) The errors I select are related to students' specific feeds. E.g. I know they are weak in prepositions, so I select prepositions.
 - c) The errors I select are chosen on an ad hoc basis.
6. Do you use error codes in your feedback?
 - a) Yes.
 - b) No.
7. If you use error codes, the error codes you use...
 - a) were designed by you.
 - b) were designed by another teacher and adapted by you.
 - c) were taken from an external source such as a textbook.
 - d) Others (please specify).
8. What is your opinion with regards to the use of error codes in providing written corrective feedback?
9. Circle the frequency in which you use each of the following corrective feedback techniques according to the scales below.
 - a) Never or rarely
 - b) Sometimes
 - c) Always or often

I indicate (underline/ circle) errors and correct them.	1	2	3
I indicate (underline/circle) errors, correct them and categorize them by using error codes.	1	2	3
I indicate (underline/circle) errors, but I don't correct them.	1	2	3
I indicate (underline/circle) errors and categorize them by using error codes. However, I don't correct them.	1	2	3
I hint the location of errors.	1	2	3
I hint at the location of errors and categorize them by using error codes.	1	2	3

In one or two words, please explain why you utilize the above corrective feedback technique.

10. Approximately, how much time do you spend marking one composition?
 - a) Less than 10 minutes.
 - b) 10 to 20 minutes.
 - c) More than 20 minutes.
11. How would you evaluate the overall effectiveness of your current corrective feedback practice on student progress in writing?
 - a) Good progress.
 - b) Some progress.
 - c) Little progress.
 - d) No progress.
12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements according to the scales below.
 - 1- Strongly disagree
 - 2- Disagree
 - 3- Agree
 - 4- Strongly agree

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There is no need for teachers to provide written corrective feedback on errors.	1	2	3	4
Teachers should provide feedback on errors selectively.	1	2	3	4
It is the teachers' responsibility to locate and correct errors.	1	2	3	4
Teachers should vary their corrective feedback strategies according to the error type.	1	2	3	4
Error codes are useful in helping students to correct their errors.	1	2	3	4
It is the students' responsibility to locate and correct their errors.	1	2	3	4
Students should learn to locate and correct their errors.	1	2	3	4

Appendix II

Students' questionnaire

(All questions were in both English and Japanese on the actual questionnaire)

Please circle the appropriate answers.

Which of the following is true?

My English teacher corrects ALL of the grammar errors in my writing.

My English teacher corrects SOME of the grammar errors in my writing.

Before / after looking at your writing, does your teacher tell you the types of errors he/she will select to give corrective feedback on?
Yes.

No.

Which of the following do you prefer?

My teacher gives me written corrective feedback on ALL my errors.

My teacher gives me written corrective feedback on SOME of my errors.

My teacher does NOT give me any written corrective feedback.

Does your teacher use correction codes when giving corrective feedback (i.e., using symbols like V for verb, Adj. for adjective etc.)?
Yes.

No.

If your teacher uses error codes, do you think they are helpful in correcting the errors in your writing?

Yes.

No.

Briefly explain the choice of your answer.

After your teacher has given you corrective feedback in your writing, what do you do?

I look at teacher's feedback and re-write the composition with corrections.

I look at teacher's feedback and re-write with the help of other resources e.g. a dictionary, ask a friend.

I often don't know what to do.

Others. (Please specify)

Which of the following do you agree with?

It is mainly the teacher's responsibility to locate and correct errors in students' writing.

It is mainly the student's responsibility to locate and correct their own errors.