

The vexed issue of written corrective feedback: English language teachers using theory to improve practice

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This paper focuses on written corrective feedback and its challenges for teachers working with adult learners in the English language classroom. The teachers introduced in this paper teach in dedicated language centres, specifically a private college specialising in journalism courses and a university English language centre. Both teachers teach academic preparation courses with a particular focus on writing. They each recognise that academic writing in a second language is new for their students and that the students value feedback on their written drafts. However, for the two teachers, written corrective feedback remains a vexed issue because of their own acknowledged unfamiliarity with the principles of best practice. This paper highlights their concerns and presents points from the field of second language written corrective feedback that have helped inform and improve their feedback. It is envisaged that sharing the teachers' experiences and the relationship between theory and practice can assist other English language teachers seeking to improve their feedback on students' second language (L2) writing.

Introduction

Feedback is an integral part of classroom teaching and currently attracting widespread interest in educational settings. Influential educator John Hattie (2009), working mainly in the Australian schooling sector, argues that feedback is 'the most powerful single influence on enhancing achievement' (p. 12). In second language teaching and learning, feedback – especially corrective feedback – is attracting considerable attention because of its significance for second language acquisition and learning

(Sheen & Ellis, 2011). Second language (L2) educator Penny Ur (1996) has argued that feedback promotes L2 improvement through the learner being informed about her/his performance by the teacher. Other researchers assert that feedback provides valuable correction and constructive input for learners (e.g., Couper, 2013; Khajavi, 2012). In addition, it offers communicative opportunities with peers (Ren & Hu, 2012) and can contribute to improved outcomes in L2 assessment (e.g., Edwards, 2013).

Feedback then is a powerful agent in L2 learning. In this paper we introduce two English language teachers and their concerns about feedback, specifically written corrective feedback. We are persuaded by Hedge (2000) who argues that the correction of student errors is a complex element of classroom discourse which requires care and discretion on the part of teachers. For the teachers in this paper the importance of feedback was undisputed; the problem for them was their own capacity to deliver effective feedback that promoted uptake of correct linguistic forms and overall improvement in their students' L2 writing.

The paper introduces the teachers and their teaching contexts. It presents the teachers' initial concerns about written corrective feedback and the subsequent ways that they used theories and empirical findings from studies of L2 corrective feedback to inform and improve their practices. Both teachers were enrolled in a master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and had several years of teaching experience. The aim of the paper is to share their experiences with other teachers for the purpose of providing knowledge and assistance in what is a recognised area of challenge. It also aims to highlight the benefits of linking theory and practice, and the opportunities for new learning when engaging with research in the field.

The teachers and their concerns about feedback

Bronwyn

Teacher written corrective feedback is an extremely vexing issue for me when teaching a course titled Feature Writing to tertiary-level, domestic and international students. Like many teachers, I often ask myself questions concerning how best to respond to the students' writing: How effective is my feedback? What are the best strategies for delivering it? How much feedback should I provide on students' writing?

Feature Writing is a 10-week undergraduate course at a large, private college in an Australian city. The aim of the subject is for each student to write a 1000-word feature article, which is then published in the college's magazine *City Life*. The writing classes consist mainly of domestic students, but about 10 per cent are international students from non-English speaking backgrounds including countries such as Japan, Sweden, Italy, Vietnam and China.

In teaching this course, I feel there are constraints which impact on my approach. Firstly, as all the students are studying a Diploma of Journalism, I assume, rightly or wrongly, a reasonable level of proficiency in written English, which often is not the case. There is also pressure, in the limited time of tutorials of two hours a week, to make sure the quality of the feature articles published in *City Life* are exemplary because the magazine is used as a promotional tool, not only for the students, but also for the college.

Each student initially writes one practice feature story which I mark, give written feedback and conduct lengthy one-on-one consultations. Given that I have about 125 students overall and all of them are writing at least five drafts before the story is considered good enough to be published, this results in a massive amount of written feedback.

Over 10 years, I have tried numerous strategies to try to make this feedback process more effective. When editing the features, I have used a red pen, and given plentiful, explicit, direct error correction concerning both content and sentence-level errors on each draft. Yet despite the written feedback and oral consultations, I have found that the same errors I corrected are repeated in subsequent drafts. Many of the repeated problems were related to grammar and organisation of the story at text level.

Daniel

I teach at a university English language centre in an Australian capital city. I teach academic writing to English for Academic Purpose (EAP) students at Direct Entry level in a 13-week course. The students are mostly Chinese with some from European and South American countries such as Poland and Brazil. The students are usually in their early 20s, with an IELTS score of 5.5 or above (a prerequisite for enrolling in the course). They are generally motivated to learn as they need to do well in the course in order to proceed into their discipline-based award courses in the university. Some are also keen to live in Australia and find a new life here. Whatever their reasons for studying EAP, what they are doing will have a big impact on their future goals and as a result, there is a lot of pressure on them to pass the EAP course.

In teaching writing, a lesson might focus on producing a summary paragraph of a reading text; texts are often discipline-based with a topic such as cross-cultural business relations. Another objective might be to write a one-sentence summary for each of the eleven paragraphs either copied or paraphrased and put the sentences into a complete academic style paragraph with a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. In the post-writing stage of the lesson, part of the error correction and feedback is from myself and part is from peers when they give feedback on writing to others. Peer writing feedback in my experience is often difficult but necessary for their learning. However most feedback is from myself. This

part of the lesson is very important but quite challenging.

I am sure that there are many ways to give feedback but many of the students are used to a direct method of feedback, where the teacher gives them the correct form. As for me, there are limits to the types of feedback I can use because of the type of class I teach, time constraints and the students' English level. The goals and entry requirements that students need to meet to go to faculty sometimes don't coincide with their own English language learning needs.

Foundational principles of corrective feedback

The foundational principle of corrective feedback (CF) is that it focuses on errors – often grammatical and lexical – and their correction, either by the teacher, peers and/or student self-correction (e.g., Ren & Hu, 2012; Sato, 2013; Sheen & Ellis, 2011). Through the CF, the student becomes aware of the error and is able to assess her/his efforts against the example provided in the feedback. The understanding is that when the student uses the CF to perform the appropriate corrections (*repairs*) during a reattempt of the task, learning will occur. The term uptake refers to the process of the student taking up the feedback to correct, or repair, the error; in other words, modifying her/his output as a result of the teacher's input (Sheen & Ellis, 2011).

From the initial step of drawing the student's attention to a particular point, or 'noticing' (Schmidt, 1990), to repeated practice and refinement, the teacher's feedback provides the student with targeted input and the opportunity to gain control over her/his L2 production. This process invokes Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Students' understanding of the feedback is seen to mediate learning by promoting consciousness and performance in the L2, leading to greater independence and automaticity of production.

Teachers generally utilise two modes of feedback, oral and written. Oral feedback is produced in classroom talk between the teacher and students and mostly relates to spoken errors. Written feedback is provided by the teacher on errors in the students' written work. Key questions in research on written CF are which errors to correct and how; indeed, debate exists about whether errors should be corrected at all (e.g., Krashen, 1982; Truscott, 1996).

For many language teachers the dilemma is how to provide corrective action on sentence-level micro-errors while also addressing meaning. Moreover, how can the time demands of feedback be ameliorated and the locus of authority diffused to peers when the research shows overwhelmingly that learners expect teachers to correct their errors (Hinkel, 2004; Morra & Asis, 2009)? In the following sections, we present additional literature that addresses these dilemmas and was useful to Bronwyn and Daniel in resolving their particular questions about how best to deliver written CF to their students.

Using the literature to improve written corrective feedback

Bronwyn

For my feedback to be effective, I need to examine other strategies beyond just error correction, including student conferences, error log books, peer and self-editing workshops. Part of the reason for this is that while feedback is recognised as playing a crucial role in the teaching of second language writing, the nature of error correction has attracted debate (Brown, 2012). For some researchers, learners' improvement is a case of acquisition and is best enhanced by writing practice, not corrective feedback. I need to consider recent research from Crosthwaite (2017) who found that short-term English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction did not significantly affect grammatical and lexical errors in adult L2 learners' writing. I will act on his point that the teacher's time might be better spent on increasing the volume and variety of writing tasks, an argument that aligns with Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1996) above. Crosthwaite (2017) maintains that this approach will 'ripen' the conditions for learner 'noticing' and help learners resolve recurring personal errors. I will also take up his suggestion of another 'non-teacher' based option which involves developing a corpus of common learner errors that can be incorporated indirectly into learning materials or offered directly to students in guided practice activities (Crosthwaite, 2017).

Peer response is a strategy which would work in my writing classes. Peer comments have come to be viewed as essential and extremely effective (Leki, 2001; Murphy & De Larios, 2010; Ren & Hu, 2012). They are interactive corrective methods and seen as mitigating time demands as well as providing self- and peer-learning opportunities. However, some students do not take their peers' feedback seriously because they prefer teacher comments, usually because these comments are more specific (Hinkel, 2004; Tsui & Ng, 2000). One way to overcome this issue is in sequencing peers to give their feedback before the teacher, thus maximising the effects of the peer responses (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Sato (2013) found in research on peer interaction and peer corrective feedback that students who had received CF training demonstrated increased willingness and confidence in providing CF. Peers developed trust in their colleagues and increasingly saw them as learning resources. Ren and Hu (2012) state that peer review of writing can be both written and oral; written responses are helpful for low proficiency students while oral review can promote social interaction and reduce misunderstandings between peers. A preferred sequence of peer review is written feedback followed by oral, to allow the formulation of ideas and then their explanation and clarification orally.

Reducing reliance on teacher correction means that students need to become independent and take greater responsibility for their errors, an important aim for

any teacher. As well as establishing a database of common errors and introducing peer feedback, teaching self-correction and self-editing skills is considered useful (Hinkel, 2004; Larrotta & Serrano, 2012). These skills can be facilitated by indirect feedback. Up until now, I have only used direct feedback. Research makes the distinction between *indirect feedback* and *direct feedback*. Indirect feedback on writing involves the teacher using codes, underlining, or circling to indicate an error but without correcting it (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Storch, 2010). Conversely, direct feedback occurs when the teacher identifies an error and makes an explicit correction. Direct feedback is often considered better suited to beginners because they do not have the required language knowledge to self-correct. By providing the correct form, the teacher gives the student an accurate model to use in subsequent drafts (Ferris, 2011; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In contrast, indirect feedback involves learners in solving their own writing problems (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). The rationale is that guided problem-solving can lead the learner to greater independence in L2 writing. Direct feedback is seen as input-providing while indirect feedback is output-prompting (Sheen & Ellis, 2011).

Example 1 shows a student text with indirect and direct feedback (Ferris, 2011, p. 95). The *sp* code is indirect feedback indicating a spelling error and designed to prompt self-correction by the student; *to* is direct feedback which provides the correct form of the verb.

Example 1

	sp		to
It is possible for some immigrants to be truly happy in America. . . They hope can find happiness . . .			

After researching this paper, I have decided to try a mix of direct and indirect feedback, but I need to be mindful that I don't overcorrect. Sometimes doing too much correction may not be necessary if the writing is correct but it is not written the way I would write (Ferris, 2011).

Another idea is to present general feedback to the whole class orally and to build in class time to allow my students to read my feedback (Reinders, Lewis, & Kirkness, 2006). I also need to be aware of how international students may react differently to teacher feedback (Srichanyachon, 2011). I should ask my students what they think of my feedback (Casanave, 2004; Yoshida, 2008). I did ask my students about my use of red pen. While the majority did not seem to mind, one student suggested I use pink. Since then I have always used pink or purple and the response has been positive.

Daniel

In the post-writing stage of a lesson, error correction and feedback from myself are the main focus. The literature in this area is very important but quite challenging, and gives me new insights into the way teachers can give feedback. Van Beuningen, de Jong and Kuiken (2012, p. 1) comment on their research findings and write that ‘comprehensive corrective feedback is an effective means of improving learners accuracy over time’. That being said, research points to focused corrective feedback which targets particular error types as being more effective than unfocused, or comprehensive, feedback (Kurzer, 2018). One problem with focused feedback, however, is that teachers may focus on a narrow range of errors that do not actually match the students’ needs.

The idea of giving different types of feedback at different stages of the writing process seems to be of great importance especially in EAP where there is a big focus on reading and writing. Also direct and indirect styles of feedback are necessary for the students that I teach, as most of them could, at their level of English, learn from them. However, many of the students prefer the direct method because that is what they are used to.

Research offers a number of suggestions to improve feedback. Dynamic written corrective feedback (DWCF) developed by Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause and Anderson (2010) is a method that I am aware of and do to some extent. Hartshorn et al. (2010) define DWCF as, ‘having two essential elements: feedback that reflects the individual learner needs most as demonstrated by what the learner produces; and a principled approach to pedagogy that ensures that writing tasks and feedback are meaningful, timely, constant and manageable for both student and teacher’ (p. 87). Yet DWCF does have limits in the type of class I teach as there are goals and entry requirements that students need to meet to go to faculty which sometimes do not coincide with their own needs.

The process of DWCF involves individualising feedback for students who write for about 10 minutes a day on a given topic at regular intervals, for instance, daily or weekly (Kurzer, 2018). The teacher provides indirect feedback using codes which the students self-correct and return to the teacher in a process that is repeated until the text is error free. The students keep records of their errors so they can study and correct the patterns, and as a result increase their learning and autonomy as editors of their own writing.

In recent research on DWCF, Kurzer (2018) found that the process helped university EAP students develop their independence as self-editors and significantly decreased trends on all error types – categorised as *global* (errors that impede meaning),

local (errors that do not impede meaning but ‘may be irritating’) and *mechanical* (punctuation and spelling problems) (p. 12).

Error types can be confusing and teachers have to decide how broad or narrow they want the categories to be (Ferris, 2011). An example of broad codes is V = verb problem; WO = word order problem; Λ = word missing (Scrivener, 1998). Narrower categories might divide verb issues into verb tense problems (VT), verb form errors such as passive and active voice (VF), and subject-verb agreement (SV). Kurzer’s (2018, p. 30) categories include: *global* errors: verb form (VF); verb time (VT); sentence structure (SS); *local* errors: prepositions (PP); determiners (articles) (D); noun form (NF); and *mechanical* errors: spelling (SPG); punctuation (P); capital letter (CL).

Clear checklists and categories of what will be corrected are helpful so both teachers and students have the same expectations. The problem is that too many categories can overwhelm both the teacher and students. For example, Ferris (2011) warns that 15 to 20 narrow categories are too many.

Another recommendation is to give negative and positive feedback to maintain student motivation as some teachers only comment on the negative and what the students need to do to improve (Kroll, 1997). Ellis (2009) agrees with the idea that it is important to adjust feedback according to the learner’s level of development; however, there is no one method that is a feedback solution for all types of students. Clearly the literature presents the positive and negative aspects of error correction and feedback and the views on how it can be beneficial or detrimental to students and teachers.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented two teachers’ concerns and strategies for improving written corrective feedback drawing on research findings and recommendations in the literature. We provide these reflections as an opportunity to share examples of changed practice in what is a challenging area of second language teaching. We want to highlight the insights gained from the literature on teacher feedback practice and acknowledge the value of linking theory and practice for the mutual benefit of both.

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