

# STUDENT RESPONSE TO ACCURACY-FOCUSED FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING CLASSES

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## Introduction

Almost all ESL writing teachers devote a great deal of time to providing feedback on their students' written work. This feedback can concern both the form and content of student writing. Since providing this feedback requires so much of our time, we should be concerned about its effectiveness. What do our students think of our feedback? Does it result in improvements in our students' writing? A look at the literature reveals that these and other similar questions have received a great deal of attention from ESL researchers. In this paper I would like to focus on feedback directed at sentence level grammar errors. I will briefly review some of the literature examining the effectiveness of various types of feedback, and I will report the results of a classroom study in which I surveyed students for their opinions about three different methods of providing feedback directed at grammatical errors.

## Background

There have been quite a few studies on the effectiveness of different forms of feedback on L2 writing. Before looking at some of them, I'd like to first consider a review article by Truscott (1996), which gives a detailed summary of previous studies and argues that grammar correction in L2 writing classes is ineffective. Truscott concludes that grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned. He offers four reasons for this position:

- 1) Research evidence shows that grammar correction is ineffective.
- 2) The lack of effectiveness is to be expected, given the nature of the correction process and the nature of language learning.

- 3) Grammar correction has significant harmful effects.
- 4) The arguments offered in favor of grammar correction lack merit.

Truscott cites numerous studies in support of his first point. I'd like to review three of the more significant ones. First is Semke's 1984 research on 141 university students studying German as a second language. All students kept a journal in which they wrote a weekly entry on a free topic. The students were divided into four groups and each group received a different type of feedback on their journals. The four methods of teacher treatment were: 1) writing comments and questions rather than corrections; 2) marking all errors and supplying the correct forms; 3) combining positive comments and corrections; 4) indicating errors by means of a code and requiring students to find corrections and rewrite their work. All the groups were given pretests and post-tests to measure accuracy, proficiency, and fluency. The tests consisted of a timed writing assignment and a cloze test. The results showed that on each measure of language ability where there were significant differences between the groups, Group 1, which received only comments, showed more progress than the groups which received correction. Semke concluded that the results supported the hypothesis that correction does not improve students' writing skills.

Kepner (1991) also investigated the relationship of different types of written feedback to the development of second-language writing skills. This study involved 60 college students in intermediate Spanish classes. All of the students were given weekly journal writing assignments. The students were divided into two groups and the researcher (not the instructors) provided different feedback on the journals from each group. One group received feedback on sentence-level errors only. All such errors were identified and corrected, and reasons for the corrections were given via a rule or short note. The other group received feedback that responded only to the message content of their journal entries. The reader responded communicatively in whole sentences, and devoted his remarks to summarizing the main point of the journal entry, expressing his reaction to the student's writing, and offering questions or suggestions for improving subsequent entries. In order to assess the results of the feedback, the journal entries written in the 12<sup>th</sup> week were examined and evaluated with respect to two measurements: 1) a higher-level propositions count; 2) a surface-level errors count. Briefly stated, the results showed that students who received the message related feedback produced a greater number of higher-level propositions in their journal entries than did the students who received the error-correction feedback. However, students who received error-correction feedback did not

produce fewer errors than did students who received the message-related comments. Kepner concludes that the error-correction feedback was ineffective.

Sheppard (1992) investigated the effects of two different methods of responding to student essays. His subjects were 26 upper-intermediate level students from various countries in South America, Europe, and Asia who were studying ESL at a university in the United States. The students were divided into two groups and received writing instruction over a ten-week period. Both groups read the same material in class and responded to their reading in short essays. One group received teacher feedback on their essays in the form of sentence-level error correction via a coding system. Feedback for the other group consisted only of holistic comments on the essay contents and requests for clarification. The students also wrote one essay at the beginning of the study and one essay at the end, which were used for comparison purposes. Examining the final essays, Sheppard found no difference in grammatical accuracy between the two groups.

As has been mentioned, Truscott cited the three studies so far summarized in support of his contention that grammar correction is ineffective. However, some studies do seem to show improvements in grammatical accuracy in response to feedback directed at sentence-level grammatical errors. One such study is Fathman and Whalley (1990). The subjects of the study were 72 students in intermediate ESL college composition classes. Each student was asked to write a composition telling a story about a sequence of eight pictures. The students were divided into four groups and each group received a different type of feedback on the essays they had written. The four types of feedback were: 1) no feedback, 2) grammar feedback only, 3) content feedback only, 4) grammar and content feedback. Grammar feedback consisted of underlining errors only. The content feedback consisted of positive comments and general advice for improvement. A few days later the compositions were returned to the students and they were asked to rewrite them. Analysis of the rewritten compositions revealed that students who received grammar feedback showed the most improvement in the grammatical accuracy of their writing. Students in all four groups showed improvement in content. The researchers concluded that grammar and content feedback positively affect writing.

Another investigation that found support for the effectiveness of grammar feedback is Ferris and Roberts (2001). In this study 72 university ESL students were divided into three groups, each of which received different feedback on their writing. The three feedback conditions were: 1) errors marked with codes; 2) errors underlined only; 3) no feedback at all. The researchers found that the groups who received feedback outperformed the no-feedback group on a self-editing task.

Leki (1991) considered the issue from a different point of view, that of the students, in her survey on the preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. She surveyed students of beginning level ESL writing classes in order to determine the following.

- 1) How concerned ESL students are with errors in their writing
- 2) What ESL students think are the most important features of their writing in need of attention
- 3) What students look at when they get a paper back from the teacher
- 4) What students consider the best source of help with their written work
- 5) What students think are the best ways for teachers to correct errors in their written work

The 100 subjects in Leki's study were ESL freshman writing students attending university in the U.S.A. In response to the question "How important is it to you for your English teacher to point out your errors in grammatical forms in your writing?," 93 of 100 subjects said it was very important. When the students were asked what kind of treatment they wanted the teacher to give to grammatical errors, 70 said they wanted all errors to be marked. Sixty-seven respondents said their preferred means of error correction was for the teacher to show where the error was and give a clue about how to correct it. Another 25 preferred to have the teacher provide the correct answers. Only two said they wanted the teacher to simply indicate the error without suggesting how to correct it.

In her discussion of the survey results Leki cites several studies that suggest that error correction does not help ESL learners improve grammatical accuracy. However, she also points out that since students do overwhelmingly request error correction, ignoring that request works against their motivation. Teachers then have to make a choice between either acceding to their students' request for error correction or trying to explain clearly to students that such correction is not effective.

### **Research**

In order to assess student attitudes toward feedback intended to improve grammatical accuracy in writing, I surveyed a group of students about three different types of feedback they received on their writing during the course of a semester at college. Sixteen second-year college students participated in the writing class and completed the questionnaire. The students were high-beginner ESL learners, with a class average score on the TOEIC

Bridge test of 125.

During the course of a semester, these students wrote six short writing assignments on which they received three different forms of feedback. The writing assignments each required the students to produce a paragraph of 120-150 words in length. The three types of teacher feedback were: 1) underline errors with no further treatment; 2) indicate errors with a code that gave the students a hint about how to correct the error; 3) reformulate the student's paragraph.

The first two methods of treating errors are probably used by many teachers. The third method, reformulation, consisted of the teacher rewriting the students' paragraphs and supplying error corrections. With regard to the first two types of treatment, the students were required to rewrite their paragraphs and attempt to correct their errors based on the feedback they had received. In the third case, students compared their original paragraphs and the reformulated version, and the class as a whole studied samples of students' original paragraphs and the reformulations. For a discussion of reformulation see Myers (1997).

At the end of the semester the students completed a questionnaire on their opinions about the three treatment methods. They were asked to rank the three methods according to a five-point Likert scale. The results are in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Treatment method	1 not at all helpful	2 not very helpful	3 a little helpful	4 helpful	5 very helpful
1) underline errors			3	6	7
2) error code			4	5	7
3) reformulation				3	13

The students were also asked which method of treatment they liked the best and which method they liked the least. The results are in Table 2. (Some subjects did not respond to both questions.)

**Table 2**

Treatment method	Which method did you like the least?	Which method did you like the most?
1) underline errors	7	1
2) error code	3	3
3) reformulation	1	12

### Conclusion

The students clearly preferred reformulation, the method that gave them the most information about how their errors should be corrected. The participants in Leki's study also showed a clear preference for error correction methods that gave them some hint as to the nature of the error. Error correction method number 1, underlining errors with no further treatment, was the method most disliked by the subjects of the present survey. Similarly, Leki's subjects ranked this method of feedback very low in their responses to her survey.

The survey respondents were also invited to make comments on the three feedback methods. Among those who favored method 3, reformulation, was a student who wrote the following: "I prefer method 3 because it's clear and we can know how to write correctly. In my opinion, I'd like to know what do you say. I mean... the way that native speaker use. I want to know grammatically correct as well." Some students, however, preferred method 2. One commented, "I think the way of 2 is good. I can know why I made a mistake." The one student who preferred method 1 wrote: "I think each method is good for me. Because I don't know that I made mistakes, but these methods show me wrong point of writing. However, sometimes method 2 was confusing me. I couldn't understand what was mistake or that meaning. Rewrite is also good, but it's not good for students. Sometimes students don't work to correct answer."

Method 1 received the most negative responses and comments. One student wrote: "It's easy to understand with correction symbols. Sometimes I can't understand method 1. I don't know where I was mistake."

It's no surprise to see that students want their teachers to provide some sort of accuracy oriented feedback on their written work. Other surveys besides Leki's have confirmed the importance that L2 students place on error correction (Cohen, 1987; Ferris 1995). To date, there is little definitive evidence that such corrective feedback is effective. However, some more recent studies, among them one cited in this article (Ferris and Roberts,

2001), suggest that some selective forms of error correction can help some L2 writers. Teachers who do continue to mark their students errors should probably try to increase their students' awareness of the potential advantages and disadvantages of such an approach.

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