

The What and The How of Feedback in ESL and EFL Writing: What Research Says

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ABSTRACT

Although feedback has been studied in ESL and EFL writing research for over two decades, the studies report mixed results. This has generated pedagogical problems, particularly in students' understanding of teacher feedback and teachers' practices of giving feedback. The presentation reports a systematic analysis of studies on feedback in ESL and EFL writing at a college level which are categorized into three themes: 1) effects of different types of feedback on quality of writing; 2) students' attitudes towards feedback types; and 3) teachers' perceptions on errors and feedback. The scopes of inquiry, research paradigms, data collection strategies, and results of the studies are analyzed in order to determine the extent to which the three research themes are related and can inform one another. A systematic review of these research studies can reveal students' understanding of feedback and the practices of giving feedback in ESL and EFL writing research which will be useful for practitioners.

Keywords: document analysis, feedback, errors, students' attitudes, teachers' perceptions

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บทคัดย่อ

แม้การศึกษาเรื่องผลสะท้อนกลับในงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อเป็นภาษาที่สองและเพื่อเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศจะมีมากกว่า 20 ปี ผลของงานวิจัยยังคงไม่ชัดเจน สิ่งเหล่านี้ทำให้เกิดปัญหาในด้านการเรียนการสอน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งความเข้าใจของนักศึกษาต่อผลสะท้อนกลับของครูและการฝึกสอนการให้ผลสะท้อนกลับของครู งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ได้รายงานผลของการวิเคราะห์งานวิจัยต่าง ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับผลสะท้อนกลับในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อใช้เป็นภาษาที่สองและการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อใช้เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศในระดับมหาวิทยาลัย ซึ่งแบ่งออกเป็น 3 ด้านคือ ผลกระทบของผลสะท้อนกลับประเภทต่างๆ ต่อคุณภาพของงานเขียน ทักษะการคิดของนักศึกษาที่มีต่อประเภทของผลสะท้อนกลับ ความเข้าใจของครูต่อข้อผิดพลาดและผลสะท้อนกลับ ผู้วิจัยได้วิเคราะห์ทั้งกระบวนการทัศนในการวิจัย กระบวนการเก็บข้อมูล และผลของการวิจัย เพื่อที่จะศึกษาถึงขอบเขตข้อมูลของความเกี่ยวเนื่องที่เป็นไปได้ของงานวิจัยทั้ง 3 ด้าน จากการวิเคราะห์งานวิจัยต่างๆ อย่างเป็นระบบ ผลของงานวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นถึงความเข้าใจของนักศึกษาต่อผลสะท้อนกลับและการให้ผลสะท้อนกลับในวิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษซึ่งเป็นประโยชน์ต่อครูผู้สอน

ศัพท์สำคัญ : การวิเคราะห์เอกสาร ผลสะท้อนกลับ ข้อผิดพลาด ทักษะการคิดของนักศึกษา ความเข้าใจของครูผู้สอน

Introduction

Within the past 20 years, there have been a large number of research studies on feedback or response to ESL and EFL students' writing. From an overall perspective, there are three main areas consisting of : (1) effects of different kinds of feedback on students' quality of writing (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Hashemenezad & Mohammednejad, 2011) ; (2) students' attitudes toward peer feedback and teacher feedback (e.g. Enginarlar, 1993; Hyland, 2003; Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006; Nordin, Halib, Ghazali, & Ali, 2010; Storch & Tapper, 1997; Zhang, 1999; Zhao, 2010) ; and (3) teachers' perceptions of feedback (e.g. Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010; Ferris, Brown, Liu, Eugenia , & Stine, 2011; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Most of the studies focused primarily on students' performance especially in terms of grammatical accuracy in their writing. However, teachers' views on their feedback and their practices have been less explored.

Motivated by the arguments each research strand has made and a lack of a document analysis of ESL and EFL writing research, the present study aims to organize and synthesize these writing research studies into themes. The proposed study aims to make a clearer picture of each theme on writing feedback in ESL and EFL contexts. Moreover, the present study attempts to reveal the extent to which the three themes of writing feedback research (effects of different kinds of feedback on students' improvement, students' attitudes toward teacher feedback, and teachers' perceptions on feedback and errors) would inform one another. It is hoped that a systematic

review of these research studies can reveal the practices of giving feedback in ESL and EFL writing research which will be useful for pedagogical purposes.

Debates on corrective feedback

A review of studies conducted to determine the extent to which corrective feedback benefited students' writing showed that the issue could be traced back to the debate on grammatical correction or corrective feedback in ESL writing for over two decades. Several studies reported that corrective feedback helped students increase their grammatical accuracy both in revision (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) and subsequent writing (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener et al., 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008); however, some scholars questioned the effectiveness of corrective feedback. For example, Truscott (1996) argued,

“There is some reason to think that syntactic, morphological, and lexical knowledge are acquired in different manners. If this is the case, then probably no single form of correction can be effective for all three.”(p. 343).

According to Truscott, the acquisition of grammatical features was a process that was subject to change over a period of time, not a sudden change which happens as soon as correction is given. Teachers may correct students' errors by using various effective methods, not only a single form of correction.

Ferris (1999) did not agree with Truscott. She stated,

“There is tremendous variability in students’ ability to benefit from grammar instruction and feedback and to learn to self-correct, and many students have made dramatic improvements in their accuracy over the course of a semester” (p. 7).

She also argued for systematic correction in students’ writing which could promote language learning “...it was not possible to dismiss correction in general as it depended on the quality of the correction -in other words, if the correction was clear and consistent it would work” (Ferris, 1999 as cited in Ellis et al., 2008, p. 354). There were two main reasons which Ferris used to support her study in order to continue giving error correction, namely students’ attitudes toward writing and course contents, and self-editing. Nonetheless, Truscott claimed “students believe in correction...that does not mean that teachers should give it to them” (1996, p. 359).

The debate on whether error correction should be given to help students increase their accuracy has motivated studies to shed light on corrective feedback and how students viewed and used feedback sources in their writing.

2. Methodology

To address the aim of the paper, the researcher used the *Scopus* database to find published, scholarly reviewed articles on writing feedback. The key words “feedback” and “writing” were used to search for the articles. The studies published between 1990 and 2013 were included. This is because in the last 20 years, there have

been many studies on writing feedback especially in ESL and EFL contexts. In total, there were 18 studies.

A document analysis of the studies was used. The analysis can help the researcher to categorize research studies into themes and compare each of them in terms of 1) topics of investigation; 2) research paradigms and designs; 3) data collection techniques and data gathering strategies; and 4) findings. This analytical approach to the research studies can allow the researcher to study how the four components might be related and might affect the interpretation of findings.

3. Findings

The sections below present the preliminary findings of the research studies in each strand.

Effects of corrective feedback on students' accuracy

The studies conducted in the theme aimed to determine the extent to which corrective feedback or feedback on errors improves students' writing in terms of accuracy. The research strand was mainly impacted by the debate on error correction stated earlier in the paper. The studies in this strand investigated a single form of corrective feedback (direct versus indirect feedback, i.e. errors were underlined or circled, given codes and description, direct versus no feedback) and a combination of feedback (direct, written meta-linguistic explanation, oral feedback, and indirect feedback) and used a quantitative design with statistical analyses. The scope of these studies was on local grammatical features namely verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, word choices.

The data were collected from students' essays in various rhetorical patterns, either in multiple drafts or new pieces of writing. Moreover, in more recent studies (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010), the researchers investigated whether or not time impacted students' accuracy after the students were given corrective feedback. This was conducted in the analysis of multiple drafts written in a pre-test and a post-test. The essays were then analyzed by using statistical procedures (e.g. ANOVAs, t-test) to establish correlations. The results revealed the relationship between corrective feedback types and students' grammatical accuracy that is direct corrective feedback help students increase their accuracy rather than indirect corrective feedback. However, a study revealed that there was no statistic difference between direct and indirect corrective feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). The results indicated that a combination of feedback can improve students' accuracy rather than a single form of feedback; however, the research studies in this strand focused on specific grammatical features. The results then had to be treated with caution because they cannot be generalized to feedback given to more complex structures. Table 1 presents a summary of the studies in the theme of corrective feedback.

Table 1: Effects of corrective feedback on grammatical features.

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Ferris & Roberts, 2001	Effects of direct corrective feedback (codes and no codes) and no corrective feedback	Participants: three groups of ESL students - A questionnaire: word count - A pretest: statistical procedures (i.e., ANOVAs, t-tests, and correlations) - An essay: word count	Better performance in self-editing in both codes and no codes groups. No difference between codes and no codes groups
Chandler, 2003	Study one: effects of error correction on student's accuracy Study two: four different kinds of error correction on both revision and subsequent writing	Participants: two different group of undergraduate students from two class Study one: Five written works: statistical procedures (i.e. ANCOVA, Regression, and t-test) Study two: Five written work: a holistic rating and statistical procedures (i.e. ANOVA, MANOVA, and t-test)	Study one: Improved accuracy in the experimental group ,improved fluency in both groups over 10 weeks but no difference between the two groups Study two: Improved accuracy and fluency over the semester

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005	Effects of three direct corrective feedback types 1. Direct, explicit written feedback, and conferencing 2. Direct, explicit written feedback 3. No corrective feedback	Participants: adult students - Four writing assignments: the obligatory occasion analysis to find out correct usage and statistical procedures (i.e. ANOVA, and Post hoc) to determine students' performance	- No variation in the use of prepositions found across feedback types - Improved accuracy in the use of past simple tense in the group receiving conference and written feedback
Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008	Effects of focused and unfocused direct corrective feedback	Participants: Japanese students - An error correction test: statistical procedures (i.e. ANOVA, with post-hoc Tukey or t-test) - Narrative writings (pre and post-test design): the obligatory occasion analysis and statistics (i.e. ANOVA with post-hoc one-way ANOVAs) - An exit questionnaire	Better performance of the focused and the unfocused groups than the control group

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Bitchener & Knoch, 2009	Effects of direct written corrective feedback on students' writing 1.Direct corrective feedback, written, and oral meta-linguistic explanation 2.Direct corrective feedback and written meta-linguistic explanation 3.Direct corrective feedback only	Participants: Low intermediate ESL students -Four pieces of descriptive writing (pre and post-test design): using the Obligatory occasion analysis and statistical procedures for pre-test and post-test (i.e. a two-way ANOVA, a one way ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc pair-wise comparisons)	- Improved accuracy after the treatment (immediate post-test) in all three groups -No differences found among the three feedback types in the first delayed post-test
Bitchener & Knoch, 2010	Effects of a combination of written corrective feedback on students' writing 1.Written meta-linguistic explanation 2.Indirect circling of errors(circling)	Participants: advanced ESL students - Descriptive writing (pre and post-test design): using Obligatory occasion Analysis to find correct usage of linguistic features and statistical analysis (i.e. a two-way repeated ANOVA, a one-way ANOVAs with	-Immediately improved accuracy of students in three treatment groups -Improved accuracy of students in written meta-linguistic explanation group and the written meta-linguistic explanation and

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
	3. Written meta-linguistic explanation and oral form-focused instruction 4. No correction	Tukey's post hoc pair-wise	oral form-focused instruction ten weeks later
Hashemnezhad & Mohammadnejad, 2012	Effects of direct and indirect corrective feedback (coded) on students' accuracy 1. Direct corrective feedback 2. Indirect corrective feedback (coded)	Participants: Iranian students - A text book : (generating ideas, organizing, drafting, reviewing, and revising) - students' drafts: statistic-t-test	- direct corrective feedback found to be more effective than indirect corrective feedback

What students think about feedback types

The second research area puts an emphasis on students' views on feedback. It is based on the notion that it is necessary to explore what students think about feedback they receive as the practice of giving feedback involves not just teachers but also students.

Research studies in this field reported mixed results of how students think and make use of different kinds of feedback such as teacher feedback, self-feedback, and peer feedback. It is possible that the mixed results are due to the fact that the researchers used different data collection techniques in their studies. To gain insight into students' perceptions, interviews, questionnaires, as well as classroom observation were used as tools to gather data related to students' preferences (Zhang, 1999), understanding (Zhao, 2010), use and engagement of teacher feedback (Hyland, 2003). Students' annotations were proposed as an alternative method by Storch and Tapper's study (1997) to allow the students to express their views on their own writing including their strengths and weaknesses.

The data from the students' annotations on drafts and interviews were categorized into feedback points: content, structure, grammar/expression, information, global/general comments. The questionnaires were converted into a rank order for preferences, and in Zhang's study (1999), statistical correlations were performed to find a relationship between proficiency levels and preferences for feedback types.

The results of these studies reported that students expected both teacher feedback and peer feedback in their writing and that

proficiency levels were not related to preferences for a certain feedback type. However, teacher feedback was more desirable than peer feedback. Surprisingly, they used teacher feedback without their understanding. This contrasted with peer feedback because students understood peer feedback. This is because students could negotiate with their friends while giving peer feedback. Table 2 gives a summary of the studies in the area of students' views.

Table 2: Students’ attitudes toward feedback types.

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Storch & Tapper, 1997	Students’ annotations on their own drafts	Participants: native and non-native English speaking students 1. An argumentative research paper: examining written drafts with annotation, separate annotation sheets, and transcripts of conferences for all instances of annotations and grouping all annotations into categories and sub-categories 2.teacher-student conferencing	- NS students’ and NNS students’ different foci
Zhang, 1995	Students’ preferences on peer feedback, teacher feedback, and self-feedback	Participants: three proficiency groups of ESL students -Questionnaire: questionnaire data converted to rank order (1, 2, and 3) of preferences and statistical analysis to compare each group feedback types: Chi-square and Friedman ANOVA	-Teacher feedback preferred among the majority of students -No relationship between proficiency level and feedback type

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Hyland, 2003	Students' engagement with teacher feedback	<p>Participants: two classes of different level of students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students' writing drafts: identification of all written interventions (any comment, underlining or correction) from students' drafts and categorizing written interventions into feedback points - classroom observation - teachers' think aloud protocols - students' retrospective interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential influence on students' preference on their engagements with teacher feedback - Teachers' main focus on errors while giving feedback
Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006	Students' views and uses of teacher feedback and peer feedback	<p>Participants: two classes of Chinese university students</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students' drafts : using Faigley & Witte (1981) taxonomy, Conrad & Goldstein's (1999) taxonomy, and revision types of Ferris et al.'s (1997) 2. A questionnaire survey: comparison of the questionnaire data between teacher feedback class and peer feedback class 3. Teacher researchers' field notes 	<p>Students' more extensive use of teacher feedback than peer feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benefits of peer feedback over teacher feedback: more revisions and self-correction

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Nordin, Halib, Ghazali, & Ali, 2010	Error correction and students' perceptions on teacher written feedback	Participants: engineering students in a Malaysian university - Students' drafts - A set of questionnaires: statistical analysis	Students' appreciation of teachers' written feedback due to its reliability and benefits on their improvement in writing and grammar
Zhao, 2010	Students' uses and understanding of peer feedback and teacher feedback in their writing	Participants: Chinese university students and English writing teachers - Students' drafts: frequency counts of students' use of peer feedback and teacher feedback - Students' and teachers' interviews	Students' more extensive use of teacher feedback than peer feedback- Students' more understanding of peer feedback than teacher feedback

Teachers' perceptions on errors and feedback

Although feedback has been studied for more than two decades, research studies on teachers' perceptions have been relatively less explored. The studies in this area primarily focus on how teachers think of and react to errors and how their practices of giving feedback may be related to several factors such as their language background, experience, and training.

The studies showed relationships between teachers' background and their practices. For instance, Hyland & Anan's study (2006) revealed that English native-speaking teachers considered errors, which were rated on the basis of gravity, that caused intelligibility more serious than grammatical errors that did not affect comprehensibility, and hence the teachers responded to the former. The EFL teachers assigned more gravity scores on grammatical errors. These differences were also noted in Evans, Hartshorn & Tuioti (2010), who reported that practitioners in different countries varied in their views on corrective feedback with the majority of them believing that correction of errors was part of their work. Montgomery & Baker (2007) provided a better insight into teachers' practices by matching teachers' beliefs with their actual performance in giving feedback. The results showed contradictions—the teachers focused more on local points than they reported. The results of the studies in this theme underscored the significance of training as Lee (2008) argued in her study of English secondary school teachers' practices, values, and beliefs in giving feedback.

Table 3 shows that the studies in this theme used a combination of quantitative and qualitative designs. In other words, the researchers explored teachers' perceptions by using

questionnaires and interviews. Students' drafts with teacher feedback were employed to gather data related to teachers' practices which were then triangulated with the perception data.

Table 3: Teachers’ perceptions and practices of giving feedback.

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Hyland & Anan, 2006	Three different group of teachers’ identification of errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Native English speaking EFL teachers-Japanese speaking EFL teachers-native English non-teachers- a correction task-a questionnaire-Analytical units (comprehensibility/intelligibility, lexical errors, and grammatical errors)	Differences in identifying and rating seriousness of errors between NSs and NNSS: errors affecting comprehension rated as more serious by NSs
Montgomery & Baker, 2007	Teacher assessment and actual performance of their written feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Writing teachers and students at the Brigham Young University- Teachers’ and students’ questionnaires: calculating numeral scores of teacher and students questionnaires-Teacher feedback on students’ drafts: counting frequent of ideas and content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics of teacher feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Teachers’ unawareness of the areas of feedback they gave-More feedback given to local areas than global areas

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Lee, 2008	Teacher feedback practices in EFL contexts	Participants: Cantonese speaking secondary teachers -Questionnaires -Interview -Students' writings - Questionnaire data - Frequency counts of feedback tokens of teachers' comment, underlining, and correction on students' writings	- Extensive marking of all student errors - Teachers' beliefs and values, examination culture, and lack of teacher training resulting into teacher feedback practices -Incongruence between Educational Bureau's and teachers' practices: form focusing and direct corrective feedback used by teachers.
Evans, Hartshorn & Tuioti, 2010	Practitioners' perspectives of corrective feedback in L2 writing	Participants: practitioners in different countries - a survey including open-ended questions - statistical analysis (SPSS)	- teachers' and students' perceptions of marking and editing as their own duties - Some practitioners' foci on content, organization, and rhetoric

Researcher(s)	Focus of research	Methodology	Findings
Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011	L1 writing instructors' training and experience in working with L2 students	Participants: college writing instructors -a questionnaire -an interview -students' written text -statistical analysis -procedures and analysis scheme for students' written text	- Teachers' lack of awareness of L2 students' needs - Teachers' focus on students' errors -Lack of training in teaching L2 students

The results from the three research themes indicate that corrective feedback can improve grammatical accuracy in certain areas and that students' expectations and understanding of feedback may not always be in line with this. Moreover, there are some inconsistencies in the findings related to teachers' perceptions of feedback and their practices. Therefore, a promising area of research on feedback should take into account both teachers' and students' views and use a mixed-method paradigm to shed light on this pedagogically important issue and to augment the validity of research into reciprocity between teaching and learning.

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