
The Effect of Direct and Indirect Error Correction Feedback on the Grammatical Accuracy of ESL Writing of Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the findings of a small-scale classroom research, carried out at the University of Jaffna, to investigate the effect of direct and indirect error correction feedback on undergraduate writing. Although effective writing skills play a significant role in the academic success of undergraduates, they face challenges in developing their writing skills. Due to their grammatical inaccuracies, many undergraduates' writing is difficult to understand. Therefore this study was designed to investigate the effect of two types of feedback techniques to improve the writing skill of these undergraduates.

There has been a longstanding controversy in ESL literature on the effectiveness of error correction feedback. Hence, this study attempted to find out the effect direct and indirect error correction feedback had on undergraduates' writing. Therefore, twenty four third-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jaffna, who were specializing in the social sciences, were selected from among a total population of ninety seven students. The group was treated with direct and indirect error correction feedback in `three day sequences' of composition writing, the comparison of original texts with feedback and revision. The results revealed that these feedback types had a positive impact on undergraduates' writing. There was, however, no significant difference observed between the impact of the two feedback types.

The study has important implications for ESL teachers who teach writing at the University of Jaffna, in particular, and at other universities across the island.

Key Words: Feedback, ESL, Writing, University Students

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper, at the outset, looks at the significance of English as a Second Language (ESL) writing and the difficulties faced in teaching contexts. Subsequently, it assesses written error correction feedback, which is the central focus of this study. The literature review consists of the theoretical underpinnings and longstanding controversies in written error correction feedback and its effect on ESL writing, while the next section details the research methodology used in the study. Results obtained from quantitative analysis and the interpretation of data is provided next and concludes with some comments on the use of feedback in the classroom and suggestions, in relation to the improvement of Undergraduates' ESL writing.

1.1 Background

Writing in general has been defined in various ways in order to suit the different needs and purposes of different groups of people. Even the scholars involved in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) Teaching are no exception. Though the development of writing skills is an integral part of learning ESL, most teachers would agree that it is a time consuming process, requiring good planning and preparation.

Silva (1993) states that ESL composition writing has been a succession of approaches or orientations to ESL writing, a cycle in which particular approaches achieve dominance and then fade, but never really disappear. Focusing on the origins, principles and methods Silva (1993) identified four influential approaches: controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach and English for academic purposes.

As can be understood from previous scholars, teaching second language writing in general requires much concern and effort. Let us now examine what academic writing entails, and the measures that are taken to teach it, as it is one of the major skills that undergraduates need to master. Swales and Feak (1994) and Bruce (2008) list a number of characteristics which explains the nature of academic writing. According to them, the objective of academic writing is to inform, rather than entertain. It is always complex, formal and explicit, and uses language precisely and accurately. It is clearly defined by having an obvious audience, a clear purpose and clearly structured in itself. Academic writing is also considered a social practice because it is always written with a particular readership in mind. A very rigid organizational pattern is followed. The way language is used in an academic context is the way it has been developed through centuries of use by writers. Thus, because of the above characteristics, academic writing must be learned by observation, formal instruction and experiment. Myles (2002) explains that academic writing demands conscious effort and practice in composing, developing and analyzing ideas. Thus, it requires effort and constant practice in formulating and explaining ideas contained in one's argument.

Being a recursive process and a difficult skill, Second Language (L2) Writing, in an academic context, requires time so that learners can revise their work before the submission of their final draft (White and Mc Govern, 1996). It is also pointed out by many researchers [Ferris (2002) Harmer (2001) Krashen (1987) and Kroll(2001)] that learners need feedback and comments that would help them compose an essay in L2 with minimal errors, as well as maximum accuracy and clarity. Feedback is, thus, an important aspect of academic writing.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 *Feedback and ESL writing*

Feedback is the term used to denote information that is given to the learner about his or her performance by the teacher. One of the objectives of assessment is to provide guidance and feedback to the learner. Ur (1996) defines feedback as information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance. Thus, feedback is provided to ask for further information, give directions, suggestions or requests for revision, to provide students with information that will help them revise and also to provide positive feedback about what has been done by students. Feedback also comes in various linguistic forms, perhaps as questions, statements, imperatives or exclamations, while comments can be softened through the use of a variety of hedging devices (Ferris, 1997). Since teacher responses to student writing are expected to help students develop their ideas fully and present them effectively, feedback needs to cover all aspects of students' written texts, including issues of content, organization, style, grammar, and mechanics (Ferris, 1997).

Ypsilandis (2002) comments on the new concept of feedback since the recent, and welcome, shift of interest from language teaching to language learning has affected the way feedback is perceived by both learners and teachers. Consequently, feedback is now recognized as an assistance mechanism; a key factor for successful learning offering support to the learning process.

Feedback as viewed by Furnborough and Truman (2009) entails the existence of gaps between what has been learned, and the target competence of the learners, and the efforts undertaken to bridge these gaps.

Let us now examine the consequences of error correction as feedback on students' writing. It is pointed out by Stern (1992) and Littlewood (1995) that in academic writing, some students repeatedly commit certain errors, and teachers realize that it is arduous for learners to achieve grammatically demanding accuracy. Stern (1992) includes error correction as a part of the learning processes of grammar. Therefore, error correction has a significant role in improving students' writing as errors are an integral part of language learning.

2.2 *Error correction as feedback*

Errors, as Krashen (1987) points out, are inherent in students' works and the feedback teachers provide play a vital role in developing their writing skills. However, care should be taken when providing feedback on error correction as error correction deals not only

with cognitive skills, but also the affective aspects of language learning which includes feelings and attitudes (Ellis, 1994). Raimes (1998) points out that feedback has a significant impact on students' attitude to writing and, thus, it is important that teachers should reflect the manner in which corrections are made.

Myles (2002), in an attempt to explore errors in writing in relation to the aspects of second language acquisition and theories of the writing process in L1 and L2, concludes that feedback is of utmost importance to the ESL writing process. She further states that without individual attention and sufficient feedback on errors, improvement will not take place. Myles (2002) in the same article points out that teachers must accept the fact that ESL writing contains errors and it is the teachers' responsibility to help learners develop strategies for self correction and regulation. Further, ESL writers require and expect specific overt feedback from teachers not only on content, but also on the form and structure of writing.

2.3 Error correction research

It has been observed that the focus of classroom instruction has shifted from an emphasis on language forms to functional language within the communicative context over the past few decades, and the question of the place held by error correction has become more and more important (Brown, 1994). However, over the last few years, the role of corrective feedback in second language acquisition has become a very controversial issue. One group holds that corrective feedback is necessary (e.g. White and Arndt, 1991) while another group maintains that changes in the learner's competence can only be initiated by primary linguistic data, not by corrective feedback (Schwartz, 1993), and some researchers even advocate that corrective feedback in classroom interaction should be abandoned due to many problems (Truscott, 1999).

2.4 Types of error correction feedback

According to Ferris (2002), direct error correction feedback and indirect error correction feedback constitute the most important dichotomy. In direct error correction, correct forms are offered by the teacher. Indirect error correction, which is also called coded feedback, needs the equal involvement of both teachers and students in the error correction process as teachers indicate errors using a code and students correct these errors. Ferris (2002) says that direct error correction gives learners right answers and learners, especially those of low proficiency, find it less threatening. Nevertheless, it is also important to note what Hedge (2000) reports that the danger of direct error correction's spoon-feeding effect results in learners overlooking their own role in the correction process and become passive. On the other hand, Harmer (2001) points out that coded feedback makes

correction effective if simple and systematic codes are used. Further, Ferris (2002) states that indirect error correction stimulates learners' responsibility in correction, and improves their writing accuracy in the longer term. Reformulation is another error correction method in which, as Cohen (1990) suggests, learners revise their writing until it is well formed, and comparisons should be made with similar native expressions of the same idea.

Though a number of error correction feedback types are used in different contexts, this study explores only the uses of direct and indirect error correction feedback.

2.5 *Direct Error Correction feedback*

Direct error correction feedback is an overt correction strategy in which the error is underlined and the correct form is written by the teacher on students' writing. An example from a student's draft, and the type of correction, are given below:

Eg: Student`s writing.: Land break it is one of the most important dangers in our life.

Direct correction: **Earthquake** is one of the most **dangerous disasters** in our life.

2.6 *Indirect Error correction feedback*

Indirect error correction feedback, on the other hand, is provided by indicating the location of the error by underlining and the types of error by writing codes on top of each error.

Eg: Students` writing: On 26th December 2004 I was attended the class at 9.00 a.m.

Indirect correction: **w.v.f (wrong verb form)**

On 26th December 2004 I **was attended** the class at 9.00 a.m.

2.7 *Review of research studies*

Researchers of the recent past who analyzed ways and means of improving students' writing performance [Zimmerman, (2000); Archibald, (2001); Reid, (2001); Cumming, (2001); Sachs and Polio, (2007); Bitchner and Knoch, (2008); Hyland and Hyland, (2008); Noroozizadch, (2009)] appear to support the notion that writing and teaching writing in the second language context are still being shaped, that they continue to be the subjects of considerable amounts of research and are an important educational endeavor.

Corrective feedback refers to "any action of the teacher which clearly transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance" (Chaudron,

1977 p.31). Further the definition by Ur (1996) and Ypsilandis (2002) explain that the recent and welcome shift of interest from language teaching to language learning affect the way feedback is perceived by both learners and teachers. Consequently, feedback is now recognized, and as a result, understood to be provided not only by the teacher but also by other learners (peers), or generated by the learner himself or herself. According to the above definitions and explanation, the concepts of teacher correction, peer correction, self assessment, repetition and revision can be categorized as feedback techniques.

Research studies by Cohen (1987), Zamel (1995), Freageau (1999) and Gray (2000) reveal that there were no significant differences in the writing accuracy of the learners. On the other hand, research studies of Semke (1984), Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Ashwell (2000) investigated comments on content along with grammar correction. However, they, too, did not find any significant difference in learners' writing. Lalande (1982) and Noroozizadch (2009) clearly distinguish between direct and indirect correction as feedback and their studies are in favour of indirect correction, which they claim promotes L2 writing more effectively. Doughty and Williams (1998) and Qi and Lapkin (2001), on the other hand, provided native-like models of compositions for impact and for learners to compare with their own output and found that the samples showed improvement in L2 writing. Bitchner and Ute (2008) examined two groups of students; one group receiving written feedback and the other without feedback, and concluded that the group which received feedback performed better. The study of Sachs and Polio (2000) investigated not only the effect of direct and indirect feedback on composition writing, but also the existence of Noticing in the learners through think aloud protocol.

It thus seems clear that feedback plays a role in the improvement of L2 writing. However, it is still not clear whether feedback has an effective impact on the improvement of undergraduates' writing skill. Hence, more research is needed, particularly in a variety of learning contexts.

2.8 *Theoretical support*

When corrective feedback is considered as a helping tool from the point of view of the teacher, it plays a dominant learning role as `input` for the learner. Thus, both direct and indirect correction play a role in learning. Direct corrections by the teacher are actually messages to learners that can be considered as 'comprehensible input'. This view of direct correction supports Krashen`s Input Hypothesis. Indirect error correction, on the other hand, not only acts as messages, but also induces the learner to become self-activated and responsible for their learning process, thereby supporting the theory of Learner Autonomy proposed by Holec (1980). Schmidt`s theory of Noticing (1995)

supports feedback as a tool for 'noticing'. In addition, the Social Learning theory of Bandura (1997), which posits that human behavior is learnt through observation, provides theoretical support for the view that teachers' error correction may be one of the observations of which learners become conscious.

An increasing number of studies have investigated whether certain types of corrective feedback are more likely than others to help ESL learners to improve the accuracy of their writing.

2.9 Purpose of this study

Though there is research evidence that written error correction feedback facilitates internalizing language elements, it is uncertain whether students respond to all types of written error correction feedback in the same manner. Thus, this study explores the effects of two types of written error correction feedback on students' writings in relation to selected theories of language acquisition.

2.10 Research questions

- I) Do direct and indirect error corrections improve grammatical accuracy of the writing of undergraduates?
- II) Is the impact of direct error correction feedback significantly different from the impact of Indirect error correction feedback, in relation to specified categories of error?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample of the study

The third year cohort of students studying Social Sciences at the University of Jaffna consists of ninety two students. Altogether fifty seven students specializing in Geography, Planning and Economics sat a selection test. The selection test was a test on writing in which students were requested to write an essay of about 250 words on the topic "An unforgettable experience which you encountered in the University". The writing test was conducted as a selection test to select a homogenous sample of students whose performance was roughly similar. Of the above fifty seven students, a group consisting twenty seven were taken as samples for this study. The sample selection was based on the marks obtained for writing in the selection test. These twenty seven students were those who obtained between 40- 49 marks in composition writing. Among these twenty seven students, only twenty four participated in the intervention.

Tamil is the first language of all the participants and they represent Tamil-speaking regions such as Jaffna, Mannar, and Vavuniya. All these students have learnt English as a Second language at school.

3.2 Research design

To test the research questions set above, pre/ post experimental design with two experimental conditions, Direct Error Correction (DEC) and Indirect Error correction (IDEC), was carried out with the same group of students on two different occasions.

The sample group of students was instructed to perform a three-day sequence of composition writing, comparison and revision to investigate the students' ability to revise their writing accurately in the two different conditions, mentioned above, of written feedback.

The methodology selected is illustrated in the following figure:

The three day sequence of the two experimental conditions			
Condition	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Direct correction	Composition writing	Look at error correction	Revise a clean copy of original without access to feedback
Indirect correction	Composition writing	Look at error correction	Revise a clean copy of original without access to feedback

Figure 1: The three day sequence of the two experimental conditions.
Source: Sachs and Polio in Hyland and Hyland (2008), p.76)

3.3 Procedure

On the first day of the three-day sequence, students wrote a composition based on given prompts. (The word 'prompt' is used to denote the topic given for writing by Sachs and Polio in Hyland and Hyland (2008)).

On the second day, the students undertook the task of finding out the differences between their writing and the corrected version. On the third day, the group was instructed to revise their original version without looking at the feedback and, at the end, both the original versions and the revisions were collected. As the first condition, direct error correction feedback was provided for the first sequence of composition writing, comparison and revision in which the errors were underlined and reformulated by the teacher.

After one week, the next three-day sequence of the second experimental condition was carried out, with the same students, providing indirect error correction feedback using the code described in figure 2. Thus, grammatical inaccuracies in students' writings, in both conditions, were underlined and feedback was provided using both experimental conditions.

This study focuses only on grammatical accuracy in view of the time scale of the experiment.

Though all grammatical inaccuracies were corrected, only three categories (*), namely subject-verb agreement, word order and verb form, were taken for analysis to avoid complexities in calculation.

3.4 Prompts for treatment

The two prompts are the topics given for the composition writing assignments under the two different conditions. As the same group of students was targeted for treatment, different prompts were selected. Both prompts reflected topics familiar to the students.

Prompt- 1 How global warming affected the world

Prompt- 2 When tsunami waves hit the Sri Lankan coast

In both conditions, the prompts reflected subject-oriented themes (social science), which are familiar to students, in order to make the content of the writing easy for them.

Both prompts demanded similar grammatical aspects (for e.g.: past tense) and style to avoid complexities in comparison.

Error code used to perform indirect error correction

Error type	code
Word order *	wo
Verb form *	vf
tense	t
article	art
pronoun	pro
preposition	prep
Subject verb agreement *	s/v
Number error	num
Negation error	neg
Spelling error	sp

*Figure 2: Error Code.
(Adapted from Tribble (1996); P.154.)*

The first tool used for correction was Direct Error Correction (DEC). Prompt 1, mentioned above, was given for a composition writing task of about 250 words. The time allocated for this task was 45 minutes. The scripts were then collected and photocopies taken. All errors were corrected on the photocopies. All the grammatical inaccuracies were underlined in red and reformulations were written above the inaccuracies, on the copies of the students' writing, by the researcher. On the second day, both the original scripts and photocopies were returned to students for them to notice, analyze and identify their grammatical inaccuracies. Then both the original drafts and the photocopies were collected again. On the third day, only their original drafts were given back and students were asked to revise their errors. After one week, the same procedure was carried out, but the tool used for correction was Indirect Error Correction (IDEC). Prompt 2, given above, was used for this condition. The code used for IDEC (figure 2) was explained to students before the revision. The errors in this condition were underlined in red, but information about the type of error was written above the error, using the code given above. Though every error was corrected in a script in both conditions, only the marked (*) categories were taken for analysis to avoid complexities in analysis.

In each category, the percentage of error was calculated as the total number of error categories divided by the total number of T-units in students writing, multiplied by 100.

The T-unit is the minimal unit, which was introduced by Hunt (1965), and is defined as the main clause of a sentence plus all sub-ordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded in it. Co-ordinate clauses were treated in the same manner as main clauses. Co-ordinate clauses were counted as two T-units. Elements were not counted separately. The T-unit analysis is a useful tool to measure sentence complexity. T-units are used in the analysis of written discourse, for example Rob et al (1986) counted error free T-units for their study on error correction. Sachs and Polio (2007) examined the changes in accuracy per T-unit over drafts of compositions.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The correction on students' writings in both conditions was done by the researcher. It was checked by another lecturer to confirm reliability. Once it was agreed that there were no changes or strategic differences in the correction made, the scripts were handed over to students for revision. Errors after and before the intervention were calculated as a percentage on the total number of T-units in each students' writings.

Having tabulated the error percentage in each category of students' writings, descriptive statistics and paired t-test were conducted.

4.1 *The impact of direct error correction feedback (DEC) on the students` performance*

Table 1 provides the summary of the descriptive statistics for the adjusted average of error percentage committed in Direct error correction feedback (DEC). There is a difference between the mean values. The mean value before the intervention is shown as 41.42 and the mean value after the intervention is 15.46.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of Direct Correction (DEC)

DEC	Number of students	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std .Error Mean
Before intervention	24	41.42	16.93	3.45
After intervention	24	15.46	9.83	2.00

In order to confirm the difference, and to find out whether there was a significant difference in the performance before and after the Direct error correction, a paired sample t-test was conducted. Table 2 summarizes the findings.

As can be seen in table 2, the t-test yields a strong significant value. The value obtained from the t-test is .000. It is obviously less than the accepted value 0.05. Therefore, the results confirm that DEC has an impact on the performance of students` writings.

Table 2: Results of the t-test paired samples (DEC)

Pair	Means	Std.D	Std error Mean	95% confidence of difference	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Before IDEC After IDEC	25.96	10.05	2.05	Lower 21.77 Upper 30.20	12.66	23	.000

4.2 The impact of indirect error correction feedback on the students` performance.

Table 3 provides the summary of the descriptive statistics of error percentage before and after the intervention of Indirect error correction feedback. The mean value before the intervention is 40.07 and after the intervention it is 13.44.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of Indirect Correction

IDEC	Number of students	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Before Intervention	24	40.07	16.24	3.31
After intervention	24	13.44	7.48	1.52

Table 4 summarizes the findings of the t-test conducted to find out whether there is a significant difference.

As shown in table 4, the p-value of this test too shows a strong significance. The significant difference obtained in this test is 0.000. It is far below the accepted p-value 0.05. Therefore the results confirm that the IDEC has an impact on the performance of students` writings.

Table 4: Results of the t-test paired samples (IDEC)

Pair	Means	Std.D	Std error Mean	95% confidence of difference	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Before IDEC After IDEC	26.63	10.41	2.12	Lower 22.24 Upper 31.03	12.5	23	.000

4.3 The difference between the impact of DEC and IDEC

In order to investigate whether there is any difference in the impact of both DEC and IDEC on the students` writing performance, a paired t-test is used. The paired sample co-relation is 0.639 and the significant difference is 0.001.

Table 5: Paired sample statistics

Pair	Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error Mean
DEC-After Intervention	15.4704	24	9.83	2.00
IDEC- After intervention	13.4421	24	7.48	1.52

Table 6: Paired sample correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig
Pair – 1 DEC Pair - 2 IDEC	24	.639	.001

Table 7 Paired sample test

Pair	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std Error Mean	95% confidence of the difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1-DEC 2-IDEC	2.028	7.66	1.56	Lower 1.20 Upper 5.26	1.26	23	.208

The study was conducted to investigate the impact of the above two feedback strategies, on one hand, and to find out the most effective one among the two, on the other. According to the results, the mean value of the total number of errors committed before the intervention of DEC is 41.42 and the mean value of committed errors before the IDEC condition is 40.07. However, the mean value of committed errors in DEC condition after the intervention is 15.46 and under IDEC condition it is 13.44. This means that 25.96 of 41.42 errors were corrected under DEC condition and 26.63 of 40.07 errors were corrected under IDEC condition. Though there is a small difference in the percentage of both conditions, the t-test conducted revealed that this difference is not significant. When we consider the errors committed before the intervention, with regard to both conditions, though not significant, students committed fewer errors in the second condition. This indicates that students gradually correct their errors when they repeatedly undergo error correction treatment.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Thus, it can be concluded that the findings of this study in general support previous research conclusions [Ferris (1997), Ashwell (2000) and Chandler (2003)] that error correction helps students improve their accuracy in writing, regardless of the type of correction, as the comparison of two feedback types did not yield any statistically significant difference.

As pointed out in the literature review, of this study, error correction and how it should be done have been debated by researchers since these two concepts are related to the theory and practice of writing. Researchers such as Kepner (1991) and Truscott (1996) claim that error correction does not help students improve their writing and may even be potentially harmful while researchers such as Ashwell (2000) and Chandler (2003) suggest that error correction helps language learning. In the present research context, ELT teachers seem to believe that if a teacher pinpoints grammatical inaccuracies in students' writing, students would identify their errors and not repeat them in their future writings. Thus, this study originally emanated from an intention to investigate and find out context-specific

information (related to University of Jaffna) regarding error correction, and also to find out the most suitable strategy for enhancing students' writing skills. As a result of the study, a number of pedagogical implications could be proposed.

Taking into consideration the fact that students' writing improved between drafts, it would be appropriate to propose error correction, regardless of types as a desired feedback mechanism, to be used to respond to students' writings.

Another important implication is that the study utilized process techniques such as drafting, revising and rewriting together with the use of feedback. Thus, these techniques seem to have promoted more competent writing. However, teachers in the research-context may need to be trained in such processes and in using feedback techniques in order to attain successful implementation.

Moreover, it has been suggested by Ellis (1994) that grammar instruction focused on problematic writing and that errors should accompany writing feedback so that learners can accelerate their development. Hyland (2003), on the other hand, emphasizes that for form-focused feedback, error codes are effective in stimulating student responses and in self-editing strategies. These statements and the findings of this study seem to imply that the teacher could select a feedback type that is suitable to handle the types of errors students commit.

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