Writing Correction Techniques at an English Medium University in China: What Works Best?

By Tim Wallis, Debra Jones & Yang Xu

There has been much controversy regarding the effectiveness of error correction in improving students' writing but research to date is inconclusive, while the question of teacher and student perceptions of feedback has received little attention. As a contribution to this debate, a year-long research project is currently being conducted at a Sino-British university in Suzhou, China. The study combines an analysis of student and teacher perceptions of written corrective feedback with a longitudinal study of error density in student writing. In the first stage, teacher and student attitudes to feedback were evaluated using questionnaire and focus group data. In stage two, five different forms of grammar feedback will be compared in terms of their effectiveness in reducing fossilized errors commonly produced by Chinese speaking students. At an interim stage of the project, this paper reviews current literature on written corrective feedback then discusses the findings regarding teacher and student beliefs and experiences of feedback on writing.

Introduction

The issue of written corrective feedback (WCF) has generated much discussion since Truscott claimed there was no evidence that WCF had any positive effect on students' writing and may even be harmful (1996). This view was challenged by Ferris (1999) who argued in favour of WCF but called for more research into its efficacy. Since then, a considerable body of research has been generated in an attempt to answer the question: does error correction help L2 students become better writers? While it is not possible to disprove Truscott, based on empirical studies to date, it seems that the evidence in favour of grammar correction outweighs the evidence against (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Van Beuningen, 2010; Ferris, Liu, Sinha & Senna, 2013). Consequently, the focus has shifted from *whether* WCF is effective to *how best* to use grammar feedback to help students improve their writing. Here, the results are far from conclusive. As a contribution to this ongoing debate, a one-year research project is being conducted at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), an English-medium university in Suzhou, with the following aims:

1. To investigate and identify possible gaps in the perceptions of students and teachers with regard to written corrective feedback.
2. To compare the relative effectiveness of five different methods of error correction in improving accuracy through text revision over the course of a semester.
3. To explore whether error correction is more effective for addressing some grammatical errors more than others, or if certain correction techniques are more effective for addressing particular errors.

This article will briefly summarize current literature and then present the findings of the first stage of the study; an investigation into the perceptions of students and teachers regarding feedback on student writing.

Literature Review

Theoretical background

The theoretical arguments surrounding WCF are based on whether error correction aids language acquisition or interlanguage development in the long term as opposed to simply helping students make revisions to a text. Truscott (1996) cited a number of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories which do not support error correction as a tool of language development including Krashen (1981, 1982) and Pienemann (1989), who both

maintained that learners acquire grammatical features in strict order, so can only be expected to master forms they are developmentally ready to acquire, which suggests feedback on forms not yet acquired would not be helpful. Truscott (1996) also highlighted the differences between real learning versus pseudo-learning, also referred to by Ellis (1993; 1994 cited in Truscott, 1996) as implicit versus explicit knowledge; by Krashen (1985) as learning versus acquisition and by Schwartz (1986, cited in Truscott, 1996) as knowledge versus competence. Truscott argues that noticing errors is intuitive and based on implicit linguistic knowledge, while error correction draws on explicit knowledge and thus leads to short-term pseudo-learning rather than genuine language acquisition. In other words, the corrected form is not integrated into students' language system, which explains why students tend to repeat the same mistakes in future writing, even though they can successfully correct the error when revising their work.

On the other hand, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1990; 2001, cited in van Beuningen, 2010) argues that learners need to notice the gap between their output and that of L1 speakers. WCF can help students achieve this and lead to a restructuring of their interlanguage grammar, thus aiding their language development. Similarly, Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995, cited in van Beuningen, 2010) insists that linguistic output allows students to test linguistic hypotheses about target language grammar and WCF can provide crucial feedback on these hypotheses, helping students to notice gaps in their interlanguage system.

Empirical evidence

Early (pre-1999) studies on WCF cited by Truscott and Ferris were limited in number and suffered from design flaws or inconsistencies making it difficult to generalize findings (see Ferris, 1999; 2004). Following a call for more controlled, comparable, replicable studies (Ferris, 1999; 2004), further research has been conducted and a growing body of evidence suggests WCF does help L2 writers to improve their writing and language development over time (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Van Beuningen, 2010; Ferris et al., 2013). Consequently,

research now is focused on how to use WCF more effectively to improve student writing. Areas of interest include:

- Direct versus indirect feedback
- Comparing different types of indirect feedback e.g. error codes versus underlining
- The merits of selective versus comprehensive feedback
- Whether different types of error require different feedback techniques. For example some researchers have made the distinction between 'treatable' or rule-governed errors as opposed to 'untreatable' errors such as prepositions which are more idiosyncractic.

Ferris et. al. (2013), in a summary of research findings to date, identified three areas of broad agreement based on the literature, although it could be argued even these are by no means conclusively proven:

1. Selective (focused) WCF may be more valuable than comprehensive (unfocused). While it is true that many studies report the positive effects of selective feedback (Lyster, 2004; Ellis et al., 2006, as cited in van Beuningen, 2010), there has been little research into the benefits of comprehensive feedback, although a few studies suggest it can be beneficial to SLA (van Beuningen, De Jong & Kuiken, 2008; 2012). Very few studies have directly compared selective and comprehensive feedback (Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, et al., 2009, as cited in van Beuningen, 2010). Consequently, the superiority of selective feedback is still unproven.

2. Indirect WCF can help long term writing improvement but direct WCF may help language acquisition, especially with low level learners. Intuitively, language teachers might regard indirect feedback as more effective because it supports ''guided learning and problem solving'' (Lalande, 1982, p. 140). On the other hand, direct correction helps students to test linguistic hypotheses (Swain, 1995, cited in van Beuningen, 2010) and reduces confusion (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). Research results are contradictory, with some studies (Lalande, 1982; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Abedi, Latifi & Moinzadeh, 2010) finding more advantages to indirect feedback and others

favouring direct correction (Chandler, 2003; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; van Beuningen et al., 2012).

3. Explicit indirect feedback (error codes) seems to be more effective than unlabeled (underlining), particularly with learners exposed to formal grammar instruction (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). However, some research (Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Ferris et al., 2000, cited in Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) has shown no difference between the two methods.

The results of studies to date suggest a need for further research into how best to use WCF to improve both student writing and language development. In addition, there has been a lack of qualitative research in this area. Some studies have mentioned student attitudes to feedback (Chandler, 2003; Lee, 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) but the issue of teacher perceptions has been under-researched and few studies have compared teacher/student attitudes towards WCF or examined possible gaps in perceptions.

An investigation into students' and teachers' beliefs regarding different approaches to WCF

The major aim of the first stage of the research project has been to compare the perceptions of students and teachers with regard to written corrective feedback.

Methodology

179 year one Chinese university students completed questionnaires about their perceptions of feedback techniques experienced in high school and university English classes. These questionnaires were designed to collect data regarding student experience of different feedback techniques, their understanding of its purpose, and their use of teachers' suggestions. Eighteen students were then invited to participate in two recorded focus groups for more in-depth discussion, based on areas of interest raised in the questionnaires.

In order to understand Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University Language Centre tutors'

perceptions regarding WCF, and to consider where these perceptions differed from those of students, volunteers were invited to attend one of two 60 minute focus groups. The first group consisted of seven native English speakers from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. The second group comprised eight Chinese teachers of English, most with studying and/or teaching experience in English speaking countries. All were working as EAP tutors in the Language Centre at XJTLU. These recorded focus group discussions were framed to respond to the issues raised by the students, as well as to explore different teachers' beliefs and practices.

Results and discussion

Students' perceptions - questionnaires and focus groups

Regarding the correction techniques experienced in high schools, underlining was the most common (reported by 95.5% of students). Other frequently used techniques included direct correction, whole-class feedback, general comments and face-to-face feedback, while error codes (20.2%) and computer-based (3.9%) feedback were not widespread.

In year one at XJTLU, students also experienced a wide range of feedback techniques including underlining, codes, general comments, computer-based feedback, face-to-face, whole class and direct feedback. According to the students, the biggest differences to their experiences at school were the use of error codes and computer-based feedback.

When asked how they dealt with feedback, the vast majority (87.1%) reported that they read both comments and corrections. Almost two thirds of respondents would revise texts using feedback. In addition, just over one third would contact teachers to discuss feedback or to receive more. Two students commented "I make notes when I see some repeated mistakes" and "I think about why I make the mistakes and try to avoid them next time."

Almost half the respondents considered face-to-face feedback to be most useful. Suggestions included "It gives me more chances to clarify meanings" and "I can

understand teachers' meanings more clearly". The focus groups also reacted positively towards face-to-face feedback. For example, it was thought to motivate "lazy" students who were often unwilling to make corrections. In addition, some tutors tend to combine face-to-face feedback with written feedback to improve clarity.

As for the main purpose of feedback, most students thought the purpose was to "correct mistakes". Significantly, more students indicated "improving structure and organization" than "improving grammar". Less than one third of the respondents thought the purpose was to improve future texts. A typical attitude is illustrated by one interviewee: "I think teachers' feedback is mainly for the current text and the future writing is my responsibility." It seems that students think feedback is only meant to be used between drafts of the same assignment instead of being carried forward to future work. However, most students (78.7%) agreed that it was up to them to use tutor feedback to improve their writing, suggesting most students accept they are responsible for their texts.

When asked about direct and indirect feedback, students generally preferred indirect feedback as they enjoyed "solving problems" using error codes. However, two students preferred direct feedback. One was often uncertain about the corrections and the other thought it was the teacher's responsibility to correct mistakes.

Teachers' perceptions - *focus groups*

Both the native speaker and the Chinese EAP tutor group sessions started with an exploration of the different correction techniques employed. The list was long and largely similar for the two groups, with error codes and general comments the most common methods. Other techniques mentioned included underlining, direct correction, conferencing, whole class feedback, smiley faces and individualized feedback.

Both groups discussed at length to what extent error correction feedback is effective. Most had some reservations about its usefulness, with concerns that it distracted attention from content and structure. Consensus seemed to indicate it was useful if

focused on a limited range of achievable aims.

The researchers were interested in identifying any gap between what tutors expect students to do with error correction feedback, and what students actually do. One tutor suggested that teachers have no real idea about how students use feedback, if they do at all: "Do they make changes between drafts? If so, do they remember?" Teachers wondered if their expectations are realistic "or do we expect miracles?" It was generally agreed that feedback is most likely to be of practical benefit, at least for the text being worked on, if drafts and feedback are returned in class time, and time is allocated for students to work on reacting to the teacher's observations. The experience of both focus groups indicates that students find it very difficult to transfer feedback to future written work; that is, to feed forward. Students tend to think of feedback as being related only to the present text, so they want direct guidance or even direct correction. On the other hand, teachers want students to self-critique.

In line with current research, the focus groups largely agreed with one teacher's view that selective feedback is more effective than correcting every error: "Correcting every mistake is overwhelming for students and teachers. We should accept that students will make many mistakes". Teachers agreed on the value of concentrating on achievable goals, such as subject-verb agreement, and on the importance of positive as well as negative comments. Individualised feedback was also discussed with some students capable and willing to deal with more input than others. This relates to a teacher/student perception gap, with teachers generally believing that 'less is more' while students just want 'more'; especially regarding grammar.

Staff and students seemed largely in agreement that conferencing is effective. Most tutors in the focus groups conduct small group or individual tutorials in class. Others make office hours available for individual consultations although these tend to have limited take-up, with only the more conscientious students attending. Weak students were defended by one teacher as they may want to respond to feedback but do not know how. It was generally agreed that both in-class and office-conferencing, require

students to come armed with a number of specific queries and have a fixed time limit.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the initial findings of an ongoing qualitative study into teacher and student perceptions of written corrective feedback at XJTLU. While there is broad agreement, particularly in terms of WCF's usefulness in improving a text and the effectiveness of conferencing, there are also differences in perceptions. Possibly the most important is teachers' largely unfulfilled hope that students will use the WCF to improve future writing. It was interesting that a number of tutors assumed their students would prefer direct correction, though this was not borne out by the students' comments. In addition, there appears to be a discrepancy regarding the benefits of selective feedback, with students wanting more feedback than many tutors consider to be useful.

This project also attempts to address a number of current issues in relation to WCF through a quantitative study of the effects of five different feedback techniques on error density in student writing. In the next stage of the study, five texts will be collected from ninety Chinese students in five different year one classes. Error density will be analysed between first and final drafts to ascertain if one form of feedback is more effective in helping students make revisions. In addition, a longitudinal study over the course of one semester will evaluate the relative merits of each technique in terms of longer term language development. In accordance with current literature, the researchers have chosen to give feedback selectively, focusing on five

errors commonly made by Chinese students. It is hoped the findings will make a positive contribution to the growing body of research in this field in order to inform current practice and enhance student learning.

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