

TO CORRECT OR NOT CORRECT? THAT IS NOT THE QUESTION¹

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For decades, writing and writing instruction have often been viewed from a *learning-to-write* perspective; within this perspective, writing should be taught when students' second language (L2) development is sufficiently settled. Recent research, however, shows that writing has a major role in promoting L2 development; from this *writing-to-learn* perspective, writing is seen as a tool for language learning (Manchón, 2011) that allows L2 learners to integrate new knowledge, test hypotheses, and automatize knowledge (Williams, 2012). Also, within this perspective corrective feedback (CF) provided by teachers facilitates language learning (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

Corrective feedback is defined as any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In writing, CF is concerned with incorrect grammatical or lexical use of the target language, and, it is distinct from feedback on content, which refers to any comment, suggestion, question, or request for clarification pertaining to either the ideas, organization, style, or rhetorical structure of the text.

There are two major types of written corrective feedback: direct CF and indirect CF. Direct CF implies the teacher's provision of the correct form or structure and may take various forms, including crossing out a superfluous word or phrase, writing the correct form above or in the margin of the error, etc. Indirect CF, on the other hand, refers to the teacher's indication that an error has been made without providing the correct form.

Additionally, Ferris Ellis (2006 p.98) proposed the following strategies for providing CF:

Metalinguistic CF: The teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error. This can be done either by using an error code (teacher writes codes in the margin. e.g. *ww* : wrong word), or, by providing a brief grammatical description (teacher numbers errors in text and writes a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the text).

- The focus of the feedback: This concerns whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the students' errors or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct.

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- **Electronic feedback:** The teacher indicates an error and provides a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage.
- **Reformulation:** This consists of a native speaker's reworking of the students' text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact.

To correct or not correct?

Written corrective feedback has been theoretically and empirically controversial. In several reports Truscott (2007 among others), claimed that error correction in English as a second language writing programs should be abandoned because it is ineffective and harmful. Truscott's provocative view about corrective feedback led to many experimental and quasi-experimental studies that have been designed to assess the effectiveness of written CF and to compare the effects of two specific CF categories, namely direct CF and indirect CF. For example, a meta-analysis of 22 experimental or quasi-experimental studies concerning the efficacy of written CF (Kang & Han, 2015) showed that there is not a clear-cut difference between the efficacy of indirect and direct feedback.

In terms of descriptive studies, the findings of research carried out in a remote region in Quebec (Lira-Gonzales, to appear) shows that both indirect correction strategies (identifying the errors by underlining, highlighting or using different colours) and direct correction strategies (rewriting the form accurately) were the preferred CF strategies of the primary-level L2 teachers participating in this study. Whereas, the L2 teachers in another study (Guénnette & Lyster, 2013) showed a preference for direct corrections to ensure that their students benefit from the CF provided because "it provides a model of what is accurate in the L2" (p. 147).

To date there have been no available empirical studies directly investigating the relationship between the proficiency level and the effects of different types of feedback (Kang & Han, 2015), nor consensus regarding which type of CF is more effective. Actually, both indirect and direct CF present potential drawbacks that need to be considered. For example, most indirect CF strategies, such as the mentioned above (identifying the errors by underlining, highlighting or using different colours), tell some learners nothing about the nature and cause of the errors or what is needed for an accurate modification. In addition, direct CF strategies, such as rewriting the form accurately, do not help learners to understand the underlying linguistic system (Bitchener & Ferris, 2010).

Certain researchers have stated that indirect CF is more likely to have long-term positive effects on students' accuracy since it requires learners to self-discover the correct forms (Li, 2010). Others, have maintained that there are several cases in which teachers should provide more direct feedback on errors. Ferris (2002), for example, has affirmed that learners benefit more from direct correction when they are at the beginning level of proficiency, when they do not have enough linguistic knowledge to self-correct.

Since language teachers spend much of their time providing corrective feedback on students' writing in hope of helping them improve grammatical accuracy (Brown, 2012) *To correct or not correct? Is not the question.* The question is how to provide corrective feedback effectively.

In that sense, it is important to understand corrective feedback as a multi-dimensional practice, and therefore teachers need to consider a variety of factors when providing written feedback (Kormos, 2012; Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010) such as the following:

- Category of error: Syntax, spelling or vocabulary.
- Learner-specific variables: Motivation, aptitude, skill level, learning disabilities, age, perceptions, past experiences, beliefs, attitudes, learning styles, time available for responding to feedback, and formal knowledge of grammar.
- Contextual variables
- Situational variables: Factors in the instructional context (curriculum guidelines and objectives, class sizes, teacher workload, and frequency of class meetings).
- Teacher variables: Personality, motivations, beliefs, priorities, teaching philosophies, training, competencies, teaching experience, and relationship with students.
- Methodological variables: Techniques and resources that teachers use to develop sensitivity to learner variables (diagnostic writing assignments to assess needs, student surveys, and drawing on the experience of colleagues).

These same variables are believed to influence students' ability to revise their own texts, that is, to understand the corrective feedback provided by the teacher, consider it, and integrate this feedback in the text revision process (Ammar, Daigle, & Lefrançois, 2016).

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