

The Student is Always Right

an action research project focusing on corrective feedback in an ESL writing class

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Introduction

My name is Matthew Gilles and I have found it difficult to choose what type of corrective feedback to use in my writing class. As I am a fledgling teacher and seek to provide the best possible learning environment, I sought to find what current research considers being the most effective form of corrective feedback. Regarding the best form of written corrective feedback, research produced within the last two to three years has given us various contradictory and mildly substantiated assertions. Basically, one camp praises one form of corrective feedback while another camp condemns it. Even so, while consulting the cannon of corrective feedback and finding various claims, I was surprised to conclude that students' opinions were seldom consulted in the research. It is this lack of student opinion that inspired me to conduct an action research project focusing specifically on which form of corrective feedback appeals to students.

Current corrective feedback research refers to three distinct forms. These forms are indirect feedback, direct feedback, and metalinguistic feedback. Indirect feedback is defined as a process where "...students are left to resolve and correct the problem that has been drawn to their attention" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010, p. 198). Van Beuningen (2010) further describes indirect corrective feedback as an indication that only demonstrates that an error is present (p. 12). In other words, "Indirect CF [corrective feedback] involves indicating that the student has made an error without actually correcting it" (Ellis, 2009, p. 100). Generally speaking, indirect feedback is provided by highlighting or using some other method of focusing the learner's attention on the non-target production. Brown (2012) explains direct feedback as the teacher providing the target structure to students (p. 862). Direct feedback replaces the non-target production with target structures. Finally, "Metalinguistic CF [corrective feedback] involves providing learners with some form of explicit comment about the nature of the errors they have made" (Ellis, 2009, p. 100). In metalinguistic corrective feedback, a student is provided with metalanguage such as *noun*, *verb*, *proposition*, etc which focuses the learner's attention the non-target production in relation to the specific structure of language represented or misrepresented. Though these three are most represented in the research of the last few years, at Gonzaga University another form of corrective feedback is provided. This is a form most related to direct corrective feedback as the process requires that students' words are reformulated orally and then provided back to students.

"A standard procedure in error analysis is reconstruction. That is, in order to identify an error, the

analyst (and the teacher) needs to construct a native-speaker version of that part of the text containing an error. The idea for reformulation as a technique for providing feedback to learners grew out of this procedure. It involves a native-speaker rewriting the student's text in such a way as 'to preserve as many of the writer's ideas as possible, while expressing them in his/her own words so as to make the piece sound native-like' (Cohen 1989: 4). The writer then revises by deciding which of the native-speaker's reconstructions to accept. In essence, then, reformulation involves two options 'direct correction' + 'revision' but it differs from how these options are typically executed in that the whole of the student's text is reformulated thus laying the burden on the learner to identify the specific changes that have been made." (Ellis 2009 p 103)

The students then listen to a reformulation of their own words reconstructed in target structures. As they listen, they re-write their work. I have added this form of corrective feedback into my action research. Even though I had chosen four forms of corrective feedback, I had many other things to consider.

My students' English ability is considered low by the institute of higher education that I am currently employed at. Knowing this, I could not help but wonder the following questions: *If I use indirect corrective feedback, such as only highlighting non-target production, will my students be able to identify them and then edit them? If I highlight errors and provide a coded system to indicate errors, as is done in metalinguistic corrective feedback, will my students be able to understand and learn the code well enough to be self-sufficient in correcting their own non-target production? If I re-write all the non-target production in target structures, as comprehensive or direct corrective feedback prompts, will my students be able to develop abilities of identifying non-target production and make self-corrections in their future writing? If I make an audio recording where I reformulate non-target production into target structures will my students be able to hear the alterations and then re-write their work?* With all these questions in mind, I finally decided that I could not know what my students could or could not do until they were exposed. The following is my research question:

Research Question:

Which of the following forms of corrective feedback do students prefer?

- Highlighting non-target production without identifying the type of error [indirect].
- Highlighting non-target production and using coded symbols to indicate the type of error [metalinguistic].
- Re-writing non-target production using target structures [direct].
- Recording assumed target structures and having students listen, notice, and edit their original writing [audio reconstruction].

The particular significance of this action research is that it focuses not on which method works best, but on what method is preferred. Since my students were to decide which corrective feedback they preferred, I methodically exposed my students to one corrective feedback form per week. During the last week I piloted a survey to collect data from my students. This process will be explained in full in the methodology section of this paper.

This paper has been divided into sections to help present information clearly and in a meaningful

way. (Each section may include subsections to develop and expand on the topic.)

Review of the Literature:

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Before we can begin talking about the issues within the research of corrective feedback we must first understand what corrective feedback is and why it is important. “According to Russell and Spada (2006), in language learning ‘the term corrective feedback [refers] to any feedback provided to a learner, from any source, that contains evidence of learner error of language form’ (p. 134)” (as cited in Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010, p. 48). Van Beuningen (2010) also states that feedback on linguistic errors that focus on an L2’s non-target use of language is widely known as corrective feedback (p. 2). Van Beuningen (2010) argues that corrective feedback is important as students may proceduralize non-target structures that have been successful at conveying meaning, thus beginning the process of fossilization (p. 4). In addition Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) assert that teachers have an ethical obligation to help students improve their writing accuracy within their specific learning contexts (p. 446). In the end the justification for using corrective feedback is widely subjective and poorly researched.

Corrective feedback is important to a degree because it is used throughout the educational process. But Brown (2012) asserts that teachers are not using research to inform their corrective feedback, but instead provide written corrective feedback based on intuition, experience, and student expectation (p. 861). The unsystematic way that some teachers use corrective feedback is not uniform nor is it supported by research. The problem with this instinctual approach to corrective feedback is that teachers spend a lot of time providing corrective feedback hoping that it will help students improve grammatical accuracy (Brown, 2012, p. 861). Hoping is the key word. Regardless of desires, using a method that has not been substantiated will only have haphazard success at best. Unfortunately though, the issue is more complex as Brown (2012) states that ESL and EFL teachers face the challenge of addressing students’ abilities, needs, goals, and preferences regarding written accuracy while providing manageable and useful feedback that matches their teaching context (p. 861). Hyland suggests that the only feedback that works must be defined in reference to the writer [the student], their issues, and their purpose of writing (1998, p. 275, as cited in Brown, 2012, p. 861). Whatever feedback is used must be meaningful. If the feedback is meaningful there is a higher chance that the student will accept it, in this view.

Brown (2012) states that the goal of corrective feedback is not to eradicate errors, but asserts that the main function of corrective feedback is to elicit a learner’s attention to language and encourage conscious analysis (p. 864-865). It is true that no matter what form of corrective feedback is used, the purpose is to bring the student’s attention to a non-target production. In its simplest sense corrective feedback conveys to the student that what they have produced does not match the target language.

Bitchener and Knoch (2010) state that since Truscott’s (1996) passionate claim of the inefficiency of written corrective feedback, there has been an expanding research base focusing on whether or not written corrective feedback has the potential to increase accuracy in writing and thus aid acquisition, as well as research focusing on the general effectiveness of different methods of corrective feedback (p. 197). Ferris

(2010) asserts that the role of written corrective feedback rests in disagreement (p. 184). Storch (2010) echoes that current research on the efficacy of corrective feedback types is unsettled (p. 40). Brown (2012) further suggests that current research does not provide practitioners with an understanding of the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (p. 861). With so much confusion, it has been hard to find a form of corrective feedback that is effective for my students. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) conclude that research has been conducted on the merits of different types of direct and indirect corrective feedback (p.198). But it is rare for a study to consider what the students prefer. Even when research does mention students' opinion, I find that those students cannot speak for my students. For example Ferris (2010) found that students preferred indirect feedback (p. 190). But until I conduct my own action research I cannot know what my students will prefer.

Ferris (2010) proclaims that there are theoretical disagreements and conflicting research regarding written corrective feedback as well as a gap between research and practical English instruction (p. 182). Despite the conflicting evidence, Ferris (2010) later states that current research provides consistent and compelling evidence that written corrective feedback aids students in developing written accuracy (p. 186). Bitchener and Knoch (2010) conducted a 10- month study that focused on different types of written corrective feedback. They conclude that those students who received written corrective feedback performed better than the students who did not receive feedback. Moreover, the research demonstrated that any form of corrective feedback was better than no feedback (p. 208). Van Beuningen (2010) concludes that recent corrective feedback studies substantiate the claim that the corrective feedback students receive will benefit them as they produce new language (p. 18). Evans, Hartshorn, and Tuioti (2010) confirm that there is a connection between written corrective feedback and linguistic accuracy (p. 65-66). Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) state that second language writing education and learning should be about what a student needs to develop and less about following a programmed method (p. 446).

What can I buy with the coin?

In a practical sense, imagine that a student has produced a non-target structure. What then? Which form of corrective feedback is best to use, if any? Brown (2012) postulates that some errors can be solved through direct and indirect corrective feedback methods. For example, subject-verb agreement is better for indirect error correction as students can access rules that are concrete while other such errors, like idiosyncratic errors, require more from the student's acquired knowledge and understanding of the target language and culture. Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) claim that students at a lower level may not be able to correct errors that have been identified in their writing (p. 449-450). Van Beuningen (2010) asserts that direct correction aids students develop the most (p. 19). Ellis (2009) states that direct corrective feedback works well for students who are not capable of self-correcting as it provides explicit guidance on how to correct their errors (p. 99). Ellis (2009), however, asserts that direct corrective feedback requires little processing from learners and thus may not contribute to longstanding progress (p. 99). Van Beuningen (2010) concedes that learners can develop their language ability with direct and indirect corrective feedback. Ferris (2010) articulates that one form of written corrective feedback may

work for one type of error by not for another (p. 193).

Ultimately Brown (2012) suggests a combination of direct and indirect corrective feedback, surmising that varying techniques of corrective feedback can help students develop a more reflective process when considering their written accuracy (p. 863-864). For example he explains that indirect feedback can deepen cognitive engagement as the teacher marks the location of an error so that the students can self-correct (p. 862).

“In this view, the value of the indirect approach lies in the fact that it ‘requires pupils to engage in guided learning and problem solving and, as a result, promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition’” Bitchener & Knoch, 2008,

p. 415, as cited in Van Beuningen, 2010, p. 12.

Brown (2012) claims that when using metalinguistic corrective feedback the code can limit confusion, and allow students to internalize patterns and categories (p. 863).

Once a teacher has chosen a form of corrective feedback they must also consider whether to do comprehensive corrective feedback or selective corrective feedback. Comprehensive feedback is where all non-target production is brought to the learner’s attention, whereas selective corrective feedback allows for a narrowed and systematic approach to non-target production awareness. Brown (2012) claims that a focused approach is limited in its ability to help students deal with the wide range of language features that help develop overall accuracy and self-editing skills (p. 863). Van Beuningen (2010) similarly suggests that selective corrective feedback may be confusing for students (p. 11). In favor of selective corrective feedback, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) assert that if a teacher considers a learner’s development and stage of acquisition, they may offer focused corrective feedback that has the potential to be effective (p. 195). The choice of selective and comprehensive feedback is yet another aspect that is contested in the current research as Santos, Lopez-Serrano, and Manchon (2010) state that there are many questions concerning types of corrective feedback and which type best leads to uptake and noticing (p. 135). Whether selective or comprehensive feedback is used, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) state that learners who notice target like input versus their own non-target output are able to modify their English production (p. 194). As the point of corrective feedback is to bring awareness to students, their ability to comprehend that their production was non-target is vital.

After reading the current research in the field of corrective feedback, I felt I had a really good grasp on the fact that more data was needed. Moreover, no matter what form of corrective feedback I used, it would not be recognized as a form that received universal approval in regards to producing greater language development. As my research question focuses entirely on which corrective feedback form my students prefer, I realized that more data was needed about my particular interest. I had the chance and the need to conduct a study which could help develop this topic.

Methodology

This action research project primarily used qualitative data methods. I used a literature review to establish a base of understanding of written corrective feedback and its current practices. Then I conducted

four weeks of writing activities. Each week I used one of the four forms of written corrective feedback. Appendix I will contain samples of each form of corrective feedback, except audio reconstruction, which is shown as a transcription of the audio file. Then I asked students to complete a survey regarding their preference of each method of written corrective feedback. After I collected the data and reviewed it I found that I had to ask my students just one more question. As this is an action research project, I did not find this unexpected data collecting inappropriate but instead felt refreshed by cyclical nature of my research methodology.

Data Collection

Surveys can provide you with attitudinal data (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 8-9, as cited in Burns, 2010, p. 81). As my research questions focused on student's preference, I collected data through two surveys. The first survey asked students to answer a question using a likert scale. I decided to use a likert scale as Burns (2010) suggests that they offer a broader range of responses (p. 82). Each question was followed up with an optional comment box. After I received the data and analyzed it, I made a follow up survey using four likert scale statements, followed by an optional comment box.

Participants and Environment

This research was conducted in a writing class that meets three times a week for ninety minutes. The ESL writing class is the lowest level offered at my institute of higher education. The twelve students are all Japanese natives and have an average age of nineteen. All students are female, have had no prior experience in an English speaking county, and have roughly the same English proficiency.

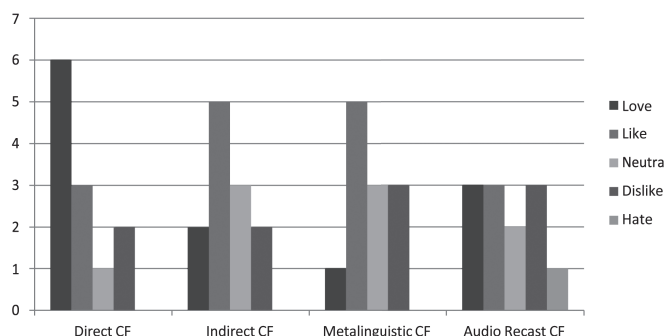
Research Considerations

Each student gave informed consent to participate in the study. Moreover the study has been meticulously kept anonymous in the attempt to protect the privacy of students. As the study involved normal pedagogical procedures an IRB was not required to be submitted.

No method of triangulation was used, save for asking clarifying questions regarding the meaning of a participant's responses when needed. As this research is asking participants which form of corrective feedback they personally prefer, triangulation was not specifically imperative.

The Data

Figure 1:
Preferences of Corrective
Feedback Types

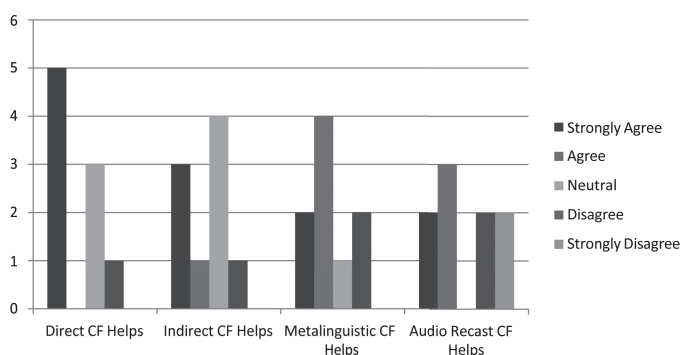


Survey I

The first surveys yielded results that I could have guessed had I thought about it. In truth that is why I created the second survey. The first survey shows that 6 (50%) of my students strongly preferred (love) direct corrective feedback. As my students are at a beginning proficiency of English, having their non-target production replaced with target structures must have appealed to them. They can gain a lot of vocabulary and language forms in a short amount of time while learning how to express more complex concepts through their own language. At (41%) indirect and metalinguistic corrective feedback was preferred (like). This suggests that students find value in the corrective feedback forms, but would choose direct corrective feedback over the two. Not many students volunteered responses to the comment box. But one student stated that, “[metalinguistic CF] can help spread English knowledge (*sic*).” A follow up oral question clarified that the student meant that by using meta-language they can develop a deeper understanding of English structure. In regards to indirect CF another student wrote, “It is easy to find mistakes. And we can practice.” A clarifying question expanded this response. The student thought that with the mistakes brought to their attention they may practice finding target structures.

All in all, the first survey did complete the research question of the action research project. But I found that I could not help but want to know one more question. My students preferred direct corrective feedback. But like so many researchers before me, I had to know which form of corrective feedback was the most effective for developing their writing ability. In the second survey I asked students to assess which form of corrective feedback they thought would best help them develop their writing ability.

Figure II:
Opinions Regarding the
Effectiveness of Corrective
Feedback



Survey II

In the second survey I had hoped to see that they would value other methods. But the data mildly substantiates that students think direct feedback is the most effective means to develop writing ability. No student offered why they thought that, however. The second survey’s results mirrored the first survey. Students like direct corrective feedback, and what is more, they think it helps them the most.

Discussion

I had hoped that this paper would provide the beginnings of research. As seen in my literature review section, exclusively researching what corrective feedback form students prefer is an underrepresented area

that should be brought to light. My humble action research may inspire future researchers and if that is the case I would like to offer some insight to those who deem students' opinions worthy of consideration. My action research project has an 'n' of 12. The data is appropriate for my own classroom purposes, but lacks all ability to make generalizations on the greater community. Were I to conduct this research again, I would try to find as many students as possible. A higher collection of data will always help to make generalizations. I also think that the time I exposed the students to the corrective feedback form was too short. Some participants experienced some corrective feedback forms for the first time in my class. More time could allow students to become familiarized with the strengths and weakness of each approach. Moreover students were not required to do anything with the corrective feedback they received. This may have had an effect on my results. The survey could be expanded but I think it would have to be done sparingly as it may alter the focus of the research.

I started this action research project because I did not know what form of corrective feedback to use in my classroom. I found that letting the students decide has been the best decision I have ever made. With empirical data I can feel confident in using the corrective feedback form students have identified as preferable. With this data, my teaching actions have become more transparent and students contribute more to the process of their learning. Perhaps in the future I will have other students who prefer another approach to corrective feedback. If that is the case, I hope that I will accommodate them. The student is always right. If they like the methodology and find value in it, nothing else matters.

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