

**THE PREFERENCES OF ESL
ALBANIAN STUDENTS FOR ERROR
CORRECTION IN UNIVERSITY LEVEL
WRITING CLASSES**



Morphology

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Florije Bilalli

State University of Tetova. English Department. North Macedonia.

Abstract

The present study, both qualitative and quantitative, explored thirty-three ESL learners' preferences for receiving error feedback on different grammatical units as well as their beliefs about teacher feedback strategies. The study also examined the effect of the students' level of writing ability on their views about the importance of teacher feedback on different error types. Data was gathered through the administration of two questionnaires, verbal protocol analysis, and students' writing scores. The results of repeated measures, multivariate analysis, and frequency counts revealed that the majority of the students expect and value teachers' written feedback on the following surface-level errors: transitional words, sentence structure, verb tenses, adverbs, punctuation, prepositions, and spelling, respectively. The results of think-aloud protocol analysis indicated that students' beliefs about the importance of feedback on different grammatical units are formed as a result of the teacher's practice and his emphasis on certain types of feedback and corrective feedback strategies.

Introduction

Hendricson (1978) states that making errors is a necessary and natural process of language learning. Inevitably, learner errors and feedback towards errors have been of great interest to language teachers and researchers" (387). However, to date there has been little agreement on how teachers should react to the errors made by L2 learners. In fact, researchers and educators have taken different positions with respect to teacher feedback.

A group of researchers consider error correction as harmful, time consuming, and ineffective (Truscott, 2007, 1996, 1999; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992; Kepner, 1991); another group defend the use of error feedback and believe that correcting students' written errors would help them improve the quality and accuracy of their writing (Rahimi, 2009; Ferris, 1999, 2003, 2004; Lee, 1997, 2004; Hedgcok & Lefkowitz, 1994).

In the past few years, researches that have been done have suggested that error correction in learners' writings were of little value. (Hendrickson, 1981; Semke, 1984; Robb et al., 1986; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1996). However, most of the researches were experimental models which were concentrated on larger groups of subjects. Rarely could any researcher pay attention to students' individual differences and include their opinions into the correction procedures.

Thus, we thought to do a case study where there were involved 33 students from all four years at the English Language and Literature Department and our research was based on two correction systems. We tried to examine the process of error correction in depth by correcting our students' writings and by asking them to make revision of the same essay three times.

At the commencement of our research we set five questions in order to realize our aim, and the questions were, as follows: 1. Can the 33 students in this research reduce their verb errors in their essays after receiving the Code Correction System? 2. Can the students reduce their individual errors in their essays after receiving the Individual Correction System? 3. Are the effects of error correction different on the 33 students of different language proficiency levels? 4. When verb tenses are used in English writing, which kinds of usage they guess correctly and do they use to-infinitive or gerund correctly. 5. What are students' perceptions, lacks and weaknesses, opinions, suggestions about the two correction systems on error analysis examined in this study? We also made a special questionnaire to see if our students in our study would like to suggest a better way of teacher correcting their essay errors.

Literature Review

First, based on Kern (1995) and Schulz (1996, 2001) research, this study reveals various discrepancies between instructors' and students' views regarding their beliefs about various aspects of feedback to writing. We were also concerned about what writing features a teacher should respond to, how a teacher should respond to a final draft as opposed to a first draft, how many errors a teacher should respond to. Lastly, how a teacher should correct or mark errors.

What we could notice between student and teacher expectations regarding feedback was that the whole bad success is caused from miscommunication and unsuccessful teaching and learning. Thus, as regards this bad success or discrepancy, Ashwell (2000) and Ferris et al. (1997), claim that 'teachers should help their students understand how feedback is intended to affect their writing and why it is given the way it is.'

Then, as regards students' need for error correction Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994, 1996) and Radecki and Swales (1988) say that it is not necessarily indicative of the effectiveness of such feedback. According to them, 'some students may hold unrealistic beliefs about writing, usually based on limited knowledge or experience.' Therefore, in addition to exploring student beliefs, Leki (1991) says that 'teachers can try to modify students' unrealistic expectations about error correction and reinforce realistic ones.'

Another point, as regards students' writings is the somewhat disconcerting finding that instructors themselves are divided in their preferences for error correction and in their beliefs regarding the relative importance of various features, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation, particularly in response to a first draft.

Schulz (1996) almost similarly found discrepancies in ESL teacher beliefs about error correction and suggests that FL teaching is "far from a united profession" (p.348). It seems that the group of ESL learners surveyed in this research also present a somewhat whole reflection of Albanian ESL learners' errors. I agree to some extent that teachers' beliefs are likely shaped by preparation and in-service development and training, professional experience, as well as their own

experience as language learners, but still it is not surprising that language teachers may hold different beliefs about language teaching and learning.

Previous studies on students' views about error feedback (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Komura, 1999; Leki, 1991; Roberts, 1999) have consistently showed that L2 learners really expect and value teacher feedback on their writing. Some of these studies have also investigated students' preferences for different types of feedback.

For instance, Komura (1999) and Leki (1991) have shown that students prefer indirect feedback with error codes or specified labels to direct teacher correction (that is, providing the learner with the correct form of the error) or errors which have been marked but not labeled.

With respect to the students' preferences for receiving feedback on certain writing aspects, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz' (1994) study of EFL and ESL college students revealed that EFL college students prefer and value teacher feedback and corrections on grammatical, lexical, and surface-level features more than those on content and style, whereas ESL students prefer feedback on content to feedback on form. Their participants also expressed moderate preferences for the use of error codes, and both disliked the teachers' use of the red pen. Radecki & Swales (1988) surveyed 59 ESL students' attitudes towards feedback on their written work. They concluded that ESL students expect their teachers to correct all of their surface errors; otherwise, they would lose their credibility with their students. In a survey of 100 ESL students' preferences for error correction, Leki (1991) found that learners believe that good writing is an error-free task. The results of the study also showed that the learners expect and want all their errors to be corrected.

Methodology

Here we follow Kumaravadivelu's (2006) use of the term 'methodology' to 'refer to what practicing teachers actually do in the classroom in order to achieve ... teaching objectives' (p. 84). In addition to accounting for important learner and situational differences, we must also be aware of the different *instructional methodologies* used to facilitate learning.

Methodological variables consist of the features of the specific design of instruction and include what is taught and how it is taught. Even the highly motivated learner, for example, may miss the potential benefits of writing accurately when instructional methodologies or activities lack appropriate sequencing, effective pacing, or adequate practice and repetition, or when students are overwhelmed with so much feedback that they cannot adequately process or learn from it.

For each unique learning context, we should ask how our students might benefit from writing accurately. We should identify what should be corrected, how it should be corrected and how often. We also should determine the most effective ways to have students process and learn from correction so they can apply what they learn in subsequent writing.

In authentic writing situations, students have to focus on multiple aspects and types of errors simultaneously. We limit the quantity of text, not the scope of errors that are considered in the text. For our purposes, feedback is manageable for teachers when they have enough time to attend to the quality of what they convey to their students.

Results

Item	Type of error	No.of errors	Percentage %	Mean
1	Singular/Plural Form	412	13.3	5.72
2	Verb Tense	346	11.2	4.80
3	Word choice	325	10.5	4.51
4	Preposition	288	9.3	4.00
5	Subject/Verb Agreement	217	7.0	3.01
6	Word order	215	7.0	2.99
7	Article	211	6.8	2.93
8	Missing space	178	5.8	2.47
9	Word form	170	5.5	2.36
10	Spelling	150	4.9	2.08
11	Verb form	145	4.7	2.01
12	Capitalization	129	4.2	1.79
13	Wrong/Misused Word	124	4.0	1.72
14	Missing word	102	3.3	1.42
15	Redundancy	78	2.5	1.08
	Total	3090	100.0	

Table 1. Analysis of errors

Taking the mean values of errors, the results show that six most common errors that the participants made were in Singular/Plural Form (5.72), Verb Tense (4.80), followed by Word Choice (4.51), Preposition (4.00), Subject-Verb Agreement (3.01) and Word Order (2.99). The six most common errors and examples of errors from the corpus are shown in Table 3. The next noticeable error was Article errors (2.93) while Missing Space and Word Form were 2.47 and 2.36 respectively. Next were Spelling (2.08) and Verb Form (2.01). Other errors that amounted to less than 2.00 were Capitalization (1.79), Wrong/Misused Word (1.72), Missing Word (1.42) and Redundancy (1.08).

Conclusions

It is important to note that these results differ from those obtained in the study conducted by Ferris and Roberts (2001), which found significant differences between the performance of both experimental groups (errors underlined and errors coded) as compared to the control group (with no feedback) but not between the experimental groups, leading them to conclude that the

type of error feedback did not significantly aid participants in correcting their errors on the second draft of their compositions. The results of the current study revealed that while both types of feedback, underlining errors and correction codes, enabled learners to produce significantly more accurate compositions, the coded feedback was significantly more effective in helping them to self-correct on the second draft. In Ferris and Roberts' study, however, to improve their essays, learners were required to correct grammar and sentence structure errors that may have been less amenable to correction. Nevertheless, the overall results for the current study suggest that coded feedback does significantly enhance learners' ability to self-correct, at least in this context and among these learners, and that instructors' time is well-spent in providing feedback to learners using well-defined correction codes. It is also heartening to know that learners responded favorably to the coding of errors and felt that it did enable them to produce better compositions on the second draft.

In conclusion, this study provides some encouragement to instructors who invest their time providing error feedback to their students, both from the perspective of effectiveness as well as from learner receptiveness. Although much work remains to be done in the area of error correction in L2 writing, it is hoped that this study will not only show that error correction in L2 writing is indeed a worthwhile endeavor, but will spur additional research in this important area.

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