

Students' Experiences in L2 Writing and Their Opinion on Written Corrective Feedback

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ABSTRACT

Written corrective feedback (WCF) is a form of feedback that is commonly employed pedagogically in writing class. However, providing corrective feedback on second language (L2) writing has received criticism for its ineffectiveness and demotivating effects on the students. Despite the criticism, WCF is still regarded as essential in L2 writing because studies have shown that WCF helps L2 learners improve their writing accuracy and performance. To increase the effectiveness of WCF, it is important for teachers to view the students' opinions on the WCF given by their teachers in the writing classes. This will help the teachers to develop the most effective strategy for students to understand the corrective feedback of the errors found in their writing. This is a preliminary study for the researcher's main study on WCF. It aims to elicit students' opinion of teacher's WCF in an L2 writing class. The data for the study is gathered using an adapted questionnaire used in Ferris, Liu, Sinha and Senna's study (2013) on WCF for individual L2 writers. This study is carried out with undergraduates in an English Language class in Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The findings of this study show that L2 students WCF to improve their writing accuracy because their grammar/language problems affect their writing. For these L2 students, the teachers' WCF helps them to identify and to correct the errors found in their writing. This study has an implication on planning a tailor-made writing class with the necessary and immediate needs of the students. This method of obtaining feedback is pertinent in providing insights to the teachers for conducting an effective writing session in an ESL context.

Keywords: ESL writing class, grammar errors, L2 learners, corrective feedback

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is a common pedagogical tool used in an L2 writing class. Teachers correct errors and comment on the errors as a strategy to guide students in their writing. Studies have also shown that feedback affects students' writing positively (see Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). It guides them to write better (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016). However, there is a debate questioning the role of feedback in L2 writing development. It is said that feedback results in superficial knowledge among L2 students, and this will affect their writing development (Truscott, 1996). Thus, teachers are asked to abandon this practice as it does not benefit the L2 students (Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007). Nevertheless, as teachers, it is essential to obtain students' opinion on the effectiveness of feedback for their writing. They may have

a different perception or opinion on the corrective feedback provided by their teachers, whether or not it is effective and benefits them (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010). Therefore, this study is significant as the teachers need to know and understand students' opinions of their written corrective feedback (WCF) in order to provide better feedback that enhances students' writing accuracy in their subsequent writings. Thus, it is pertinent that L2 students are given the opportunity to express their opinion of teacher's WCF to ensure that the WCF provided is effective.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Feedback in the writing classroom guides students in their writing development (Ferris & Robert, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Ene & Kosobucki, 2016). Feedback such as correcting errors and commenting on students' written works are common for many L2 teachers because there are among the most common pedagogical strategies employed in a writing class. The feedback is provided either in oral or written form. Despite its advantages, the effectiveness of the feedback for improving L2 students' writing accuracy is still an issue. Studies have shown that WCF has a positive effect on students' writing over time (Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). Yet, the positive effects of WCF on students' writing are still the subject of much debate.

The debate started when Truscott's (1996) essay questioned the role of WCF in enhancing L2 students' writing. He argues that WCF will only result in 'pseudo-learning', in which L2 learners will only acquire superficial knowledge (Truscott, 1996). Therefore, L2 writing teachers should abandon the idea to provide WCF because it is harmful and ineffective to L2 learners (Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007). Truscott's strong opposition on WCF has received mixed responses from scholars in second language acquisition (SLA) and second language writing (SLW) fields. In relation to this, researchers of SLA and SLW had conducted studies on the role of WCF and published the studies either as research articles, meta-analyses, scholarly syntheses of the arguments of the topic, and responses or rebuttals to the arguments or studies of this WCF topic. It is argued that WCF has positive role on students' writing development (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2010; van Beuningen, 2010; Nassaji, 2011; van Beuningen, de Jong & Kuiken, 2011; Lee, 2013; Shintani, Ellis & Suzuki, 2014), and it should be applied in L2 writing classes (Gu nette, 2007; Ferris, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In response to Truscott's claim (1996, 1999, 2007) on the ineffectiveness of WCF, and the argument on WCF positive role on students' writing development, the researchers conducted this study to find out the L2 students' opinion on WCF.

In addition, there is a growing interest on how students perceive the efficacy of WCF on their writing (e.g. Diab, 2005; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Lee, 2008; Brown, 2009; Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Simard, Gu nette & Bergeron, 2015; Chen, Nassaji & Liu, 2016). L2 students' perception or opinion on the usefulness of WCF on their writing determines the role of WCF. This is because these students may interpret the WCF provided differently from their teachers (Chen et al., 2016), and this may impede the learning effectiveness (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010). Although there are many studies done on students' perception and opinion-oriented research on WCF, there are still unexplored areas that need to be studied (Chen et al., 2016). For instance, the learning context of which WCF is implemented. WCF research on the learning context of the L2 students is still limited because many of the previous studies were on oral corrective feedback (Goldstein, 2001). Also, many of the studies conducted on this topic focused on international students in English-speaking countries (Chen et al., 2016).

Thus, for this study, the researchers focus on Malaysian low proficiency students in an L2 context.

In Malaysia, students are exposed and learn English as a second language throughout their schooling years (six years in primary school and between five to seven years in secondary school). Some even continue taking the English language courses at university. Yet, there are students who are still not able to master the basic grammatical rules of the English language. Despite getting corrective feedback, either orally or in written form from their teachers, these students are still making grammatical errors in writing. With Truscott's claim (1996, 1999, 2007) on the ineffectiveness of corrective feedback and his calling to abandon this practice, it is imperative to understand L2 students' opinion of the teacher's corrective feedback, whether or not, students feel that the teachers' corrective feedback helps to improve their writing. Also, by understanding the students' opinion, recommendations can be offered to enhance the students' writing accuracy. Given the background of the study, it is essential for research on WCF by teachers to be investigated further.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is carried out with two specific aims, mainly to gather L2 students' opinion of teacher WCF in an L2 writing class, and to suggest ways to provide WCF based on the L2 students' opinion of teacher WCF in an L2 writing class. It attempts to answer the questions on what is L2 students' opinion of teacher WCF in an L2 writing class, and what are L2 students' suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of teacher WCF in an L2 writing class. In addition, this is a preliminary study for the researchers' main study on corrective feedback. Therefore, the questionnaire used for the main study is piloted in this study in order to test the feasibility of the main study and also to validate the questionnaire.

METHODOLOGY

RESPONDENTS

The study was conducted in one of the local universities in East Malaysia, i.e. the Centre of the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), University Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The respondents of the study were selected based on the convenient sampling due to the respondents' hectic schedule and the limited time allocated for them during the English Language class. A total of 12 students from Level 4 of the English language course in the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), participated in the study. There are four English language courses offered for students with MUET (Malaysian University English Test) Bands 1 to 3. The respondents of this study had taken three language courses before doing Level 4, which is the final level of the language course. The three courses (Levels 1, 2 and 3) focus on grammar and language skills, i.e. speaking, reading and writing. More than 40 per cent of the participants are local Sabahan, namely Suluk, Bajau, Dusun, Bugis and Kadazan; about 33.3 per cent are Malays and less than 17 per cent is Chinese. Only 8.3 per cent of the respondents is from Sarawak (Iban).

INSTRUMENTS

The questionnaire used in Ferris, Liu, Sinha and Senna's study (2013) on written corrective feedback (WCF) for individual L2 writers was used in this study. Since the questionnaire used in the Ferris et al.'s study (2013) elicited the individual L2 writer's background and experience in L2, as well as the study also focused on corrective feedback of L2 writers, the researchers adapted the questionnaire. The questionnaire has a combination of open-ended questions and multiple-choice items. It was also presented in two languages, i.e. Malay and English. This was to maximise the respondents' understanding of the questions.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A and Section B. A general instruction was provided on the cover page of the questionnaire, and specific instructions were provided for Sections A and B. There are nine items in the questionnaire, namely five items in Section A and four items in Section B. Items 1-5 (Section A of the questionnaire) elicit the background of the respondents, i.e. the ethnicity, gender, MUET (Malaysian University English Language Test) results, names of recent English language courses taken in PPIB, and the grades obtained for the courses. The type of question in Section A is open-ended. Thus, the respondents need to write the responses in the space provided in the questionnaire. Section B of the questionnaire consists of multiple-choice items. The respondents must indicate their responses by circling a number that best corresponds to their choice. Items 6-9 (Section B of the questionnaire) elicit the respondents' writing and language experiences (items 6-7) as well as their opinion of the corrective feedback (items 8-9). Item 6 of the questionnaire elicits the respondents' background knowledge on English grammar rules, whereas item 7 of the questionnaire elicits the respondents' choice of their language use in writing. Item 8 of the questionnaire elicits the respondents' suggestion on how the corrective feedback should be provided by teachers. Item 9 of the questionnaire elicits the respondents' opinion of the effect of reflecting the corrective feedback on their writing. Space was provided for item 9 for respondents to express their opinions. This space is provided in order to gather the qualitative data for item 9 of the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data gathered from the questionnaire (items 1-5 of Section A and items 6-9 of Section B) was analysed descriptively where frequency count was used to score the responses. The frequency counts were then converted into a percentage for each response. The researchers discuss the findings of the study according to the sections of the questionnaire. Table 1 shows the respondents' ethnicity. Most of the respondents were local Sabahan and the other respondents were Malays, Chinese and Iban. The respondents of this study obtained MUET (Malaysian University English Language Test) Band 2. They had also completed three compulsory English Language courses in PPIB, namely Communicative English Grammar (Level 1), Oral Communication in English (Level 2) and Reading and Writing in English (Level 3). The grades obtained for these courses range from the lowest grade C, to the best, grade A. They were doing Level 4 of the English language course, i.e. English for Occupational Purposes, at the time of the study.

Section B elicits the respondents' writing and language experiences, and their opinion of corrective feedback. The researchers discuss the findings of this section based on items 6-9 of the questionnaire. The findings are as follows:

In item 6 of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their background knowledge of the English grammar rules. Table 1 illustrates the responses.

Item 6: Have you ever learnt any English grammar rules or terms like noun, verb, preposition etc. in English classes you have taken before?

Table 1
Background Knowledge of English Grammar Rules.

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=12)
Not sure	0
Very little or never	0
Sometimes	0
Yes, a lot	12

Table 1 shows that the respondents have background knowledge of English grammar rules (100 per cent of the respondents chose *Yes, a lot*). The respondents have taken all three compulsory English language courses of the university, namely Communicative English Grammar (Level 1), Oral Communication in English (Level 2) and Reading and Writing in English (Level 3). Moreover, these students were also exposed to and learnt the language at primary and secondary schools. This explains the 100 per cent response to *Yes, a lot*.

In item 7 of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their opinion on their English language use in writing. Table 2 illustrates the responses.

Item 7: Please circle ONE statement which best describes how you feel about your English language use in writing.

Table 2
Opinion on the English Language Use in Writing.

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=12)
My English grammar/language problems are serious and really affect my writing.	9
English grammar is not a serious problem to me.	1
Other writing issues like punctuation are more important than my English grammar problem.	1
I'm not sure if it's a problem.	1

Table 2 illustrates the respondents' opinion on their English language use in writing. 75 per cent (9 respondents) of the respondents noted that they have problems with their grammar and it affects their writing significantly. The lowest grade scored by this group of respondents was C. This grade is considered as a *Pass* (scored 50 to 54 per cent according to UMS grading system). Only one respondent noted that he does not have any problem with English grammar. This respondent scored a grade A for Level 1 Communicative English Grammar and Level 2 Oral Communication in English respectively, which explains his response to item 7. One respondent also noted that grammar is not his main problem when writing. For this respondent, other writing problems such as punctuation are his main problem in writing. This respondent also obtained a grade A for Level 3 Reading and Writing in English, and a grade

A- for Level 1 Communicative English Grammar, and Level 2 Oral Communication in English respectively. Grades A- and A in UMS grading system are considered as a *Distinction*, where students scored 75 to 79 per cent for a grade A- and 80 to 100 per cent for a grade A. Perhaps this explains his response to item 7. Another respondent was unable to verify his poor proficiency level in grammar. He noted that he was "unsure whether to consider his poor use of the language is a problem". This respondent obtained a grade B respectively for Level 1 Communicative English Grammar, Level 2 Oral Communication in English, and Level 3 Reading and Writing in English. In UMS grading system, the B grade is categorised as a *Credit*, with scores ranging from 65 to 69 per cent for each course.

In item 8 of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to recommend the best method for teachers to give feedback on the grammatical and language errors found in their writing. Table 3 illustrates the responses.

Item 8: In your opinion, what is the best way for an English teacher to give feedback about your grammar/language errors in your writing?

Table 3
Feedback on Grammar/Language Errors in Writing.

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=12)
Correct only the most serious errors	0
Circle but don't correct errors	1
Circle errors and label them by type	8
Correct all of my errors for me	3

Table 3 shows how the respondents want their English teacher to give feedback about their grammar/language errors in writing. Most of the respondents (about 67 per cent) preferred their teacher to circle the errors and to label them according to their types. The other three respondents (25 per cent) wanted their teacher to correct all the errors for them. Only one respondent preferred the teacher to only circle the errors without correcting them because he prefers a face-to-face consultation with the teacher regarding the errors. This student had responded earlier (item 7) that grammar was not his major problem in writing.

In item 9 of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their opinion on the effect of reflecting their own errors identified in the teachers' WCF on their writing accuracy. Table 4 shows the responses.

Item 9: In your opinion, does reflecting your own mistakes/errors pointed in the written corrective feedback help you to write grammatically accurate?

Table 4
Reflecting Own Errors to Write Grammatically Accurate.

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=12)
Yes	11
No	1

Table 4 shows the respondents' opinion about the effects of reflecting own errors pointed in WCF on their writing accuracy. Almost 92 per cent of the respondents agreed that their writing accuracy is enhanced if they reflect on the errors pointed in the WCF. Among the reasons given by these respondents were that the reflection helps them to understand the errors and the corrections given so that similar errors can be avoided in subsequent writing.

This will eventually result in more grammatically accurate writing in future. Nevertheless, one respondent said that WCF only helps her to minimise the grammatical errors in the subsequent writing. It does not affect her writing accuracy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study illustrated the L2 students' opinion of teacher WCF in an L2 writing class. It is argued that WCF is ineffective and should not be practised in an L2 writing class because it results in 'pseudo-learning', where L2 students will only acquire superficial knowledge (Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007). Despite this opposition on WCF, researchers are interested to investigate students' perception of WCF on their writing (e.g. Diab, 2005; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Lee, 2008; Brown, 2009; Amrhein&Nassaji, 2010; Simard, Guénette & Bergeron, 2015; Chen, Nassaji & Liu, 2016). This is because the findings of such a study will determine the role of WCF in an L2 writing class. The findings of this study have concluded that WCF plays an influential role in an L2 writing class. The L2 students, in this study, need WCF in order to enhance their writing accuracy. These students are aware that their grammatical problems have affected their writing, and teachers' WCF helps them to identify and to correct the errors found in their writing. Despite Truscott's claim (1996, 1999, 2007) on WCF's negative effects on L2 writing, this study has illustrated that these L2 students prefer their teachers to identify and to label the errors found in their writing. In addition, the L2 students should be given the opportunity to reflect the errors identified and corrected by teachers. This is because it helps them to understand the errors they did and the corrections for the errors. This will prevent them from making similar mistakes in subsequent writing. Although this study shows the needs to provide WCF for students' writing, and the role of reflection of own errors, it should be noted that this is only a preliminary study carried out with a small group of undergraduates. While executing the questionnaire, the researchers realised that more multiple-choice-related items should be provided in order to gain more information on the specific components of grammar and writing topics so that the teacher will be able to structure their writing tasks according to the needs of these L2 learners. The questionnaire should also contain more open-ended questions for students to express their opinions on the responses they chose. Also, it is recommended that future studies employ other instruments such as an interview session to obtain more immediate and detailed information on any uncertain data gathered through a questionnaire. A larger sample is also advised for future research in order to investigate the robustness of the findings.

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