

How to Correct Written Errors in English Writing

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Abstract

This paper examines the various methods and strategies for correcting written errors in English writing, focusing on techniques that can be effectively implemented by both teachers and learners. The study aims to provide practical guidance on how to address different types of errors and enhance the quality of learners' writing.

Keywords

Errors; Written Corrective Feedback; English Writing.

1. Introduction

National English Curriculum Standards for General High School points out that language ability, a basic element in the core competencies for the subject of English, requires students to understand and express meaning by listening, speaking, reading, writing and reading in social contexts. Writing, as a key part of language output process, has always been believed to be an efficient way for the measurement of learners' language ability, making the cultivation of writing ability a vital objective in language learning. WCF is usually the means teachers used to deal with the grammatical errors in learners' writings. For instance, Lee(2018:2) argues that "feedback can be used as an instructional tool to help students improve their writing, so it has a central role to play in the writing classroom". While the effectiveness and necessity of WCF has been under discussion. Truscott takes the view that all forms of error correction in L2 students' writings are ineffective. However Ferris(1999) argued that this standpoint is too premature. How to correct and how to improve the effectiveness of WCF still deserves further research.

2. Literature Review

This part is intended to track the development of the research into WCF and errors. It will first review the previous studies on the definition of WCF and errors. Then, it will further explore the studies on types of WCF and studies on Error categories in writing. Finally, it will track related studies on different error types in WCF.

2.1. Key Terms of this Paper

2.1.1. Corrective Feedback

Many scholars and linguists have made their own statements of Corrective feedback(CF). Chaudron(1977) asserted that CF functions in different ways to guide learners to ward preferred performance. According to Chaudron(1988:150), CF is "any teacher behavior that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error". The purpose of feedback is to correct learners' mistakes and improving their understanding, fluency, and accuracy in language learning. Keh(1990) deemed that feedback can be defined as input to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision. There are three areas of feedback as revision in writing were also summarized, which includes peer feedback, conferences as feedback, and teachers' corrective feedback. Hendrickson(1978) proposed five questions about teachers' concerning error correction in writing: "Should learners' errors be corrected? When should

learners' errors be corrected? Which errors should be corrected? How should errors be corrected? Who should do the correction?" Some Scholars also contended the definition of CF. To sum up, CF is any information provided by teachers to learners upon their erroneous utterances, aiming at indicating the incorrect use of the target forms and encouraging learners' repair for precision and accuracy. Based on the definitions above, CF in the present study refers to any written indication concerning some aspects of the output from the teachers to students, aiming at providing information for students' revision, namely Written Corrective Feedback(WCF).

2.1.2. Errors

Many scholars have discussed numerous definitions of errors. To begin with, Corder(1967:167) asserted that error is the incorrect use of a language that resulted from the flaws in the system of language that the learner is using, which is not only a learning device, but also "a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language". "error" refers to systematic errors that ascribed to the deficiency of the target language knowledge, which is associated with learners' language competence. Moreover, Lennon(1991:182) defined error as "A linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speaker counterparts." In China, Dai and Shu (1994) proposed that an error is defined as a deviation in the use of a language that results from ignorance of its rules. Wang (1999) adopted the definition of an error as a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of native speaker, which reflects the interlanguage competence of the learner. Although scholars hold different opinions toward the definition, an error in writing usually refers to the deviation from the written norm of the target language.

2.2. Related Studies Home and Abroad

2.2.1. Related Studies on Written Corrective Feedback

Table 1. Types of error correction

Type of CF	Description	Evaluation
Direct CF	the feedback in which teachers point out students' errors and provide the correct forms for students to revise their writing.	This kind of feedback is straightforward, but it may make students lack the opportunity to think and correct their errors. It is more suitable for low-level language learners.
Indirect CF	the feedback in which teachers indicate students' errors without giving them answers. One indicates where the error is by underlying it, and instead of providing the exact location, the other just places a cross in the margin next to the line containing the error.	Encourage students to correct themselves, but it may not be clear enough for some students, and it takes more time to understand
Metalinguistic CF	teachers provide students with some form of explicit explanation about the nature of the errors occurred without providing correct forms.	considered to be a more challenging form of feedback that encourages students to think and solve problems, but is not suitable for low-level language learners
Focused and unfocused CF	Focused CF refers to the feedback in which teachers target at certain error types for correction. unfocused CF, teachers make corrections to all error types.	Focused CF is helpful for students to make progress in a certain point but may ignore other errors. Unfocused CF Provides comprehensive feedback but may make students feel too stressed to deal with all errors.
Electronic feedback	Use electronic tools or software to provide corrective feedback, such as automatic correction system, online writing platform, etc.	Providing immediate feedback on teachers' workload but may lack personalized guidance
Reformulation	This consists of a native speaker's reworking of the students' entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact.	Providing clear examples of modifications helps students understand how to improve expression but may limit students' creativity

It is important for researchers and teachers to systematically determine the choice of writing error correction. See Table 1. Ellis (2009) proposes a practical classification of WCF by examining the various corrective options for students' writing. Systematic identification of these options is critical to determining whether WCF is effective, and, if so, which WCF is most effective.

In conclusion, the WCF classification of Ellis (2009) has important reference value for future research because it classifies different types of WCF strategies.

Research has investigated the effectiveness of different types of written corrective feedback in improving learners' writing proficiency. The results are various with some studies showing positive effects and others showing limited or no effects. Truscott (1996) first asserted that grammar correction was ineffective for L1 writing. While Ellis, Sheen & Murakami et al. (2008) provide evidence that CF can be effective in an EFL context. Similar to foreign related research, domestic research also focuses on "Is WCF effective?" and "What kind of WCF is more effective?" (e.g., Wang Junju, 2006; Li Jing, 2011; Li Fei & Sun Yunmei, 2019).

2.2.2. Related Studies on Error Categories in Writing

Since 1960s, many researches have focused on the classification of learners' language errors, Politzer and Ramirez (1973) distinguished errors of morphology, syntax and vocabulary. There were six types of errors in morphology (i.e. errors in indefinite article, possessive case, third-person singular verb, simple past tense, past participle and comparative adjective/adverb), five types in syntax (i.e. noun phrases, verb phrase, verb-and-verb construction, word order and some transformations), and three types in vocabulary (i.e. errors due to the signifier, selection of inappropriate word and semantic confusion). Richards (1971) provided different categories of linguistic error by illustrating different kinds of errors relating to the production and distribution of verb groups, prepositions, articles and the use of questions. Nevertheless, the deficiency of this study lies in the lack of error quantification. In recent decades, researchers in China have begun to study the classification of errors from various perspectives. Cai and Dai (2001) deemed that there are six major error categories (i.e. cognitive, linguistic and behavioral errors, errors measured by quantity, property and order). In addition, Liu (2001) classified and analyzed junior high school students' error types, which incorporates overgeneralization and ignorance of rule restriction, ignorance of rules and forms, false concepts hypothesized, omission, additions, incomplete application of rules, archaic forms and alternating forms and interference. Furthermore, many scholars have been investigating learner's error types by focusing on one single aspect of language errors and a number of suggestions on how to deal with the error types were proposed.

3. Problem Solutions

3.1. Use of Various WCF Strategies

The way of WCF should be based on learners' difference and the type of writing errors. The feedback effect may be affected by many factors. Kang and Han (2015) found that focused feedback is more effective than unfocused feedback, and direct feedback is better than indirect feedback. High-level learners benefit more than beginners. Feedback effect is regulated by three variables: learners' level, research background and writing task type. For example, teachers should mainly use indirect feedback to learners with higher language proficiency because it is easier for them to understand the teacher's error tips and complete the revision through their own efforts. Direct feedback is better than indirect feedback to learners' with lower language proficiency because these learners are less likely to complete composition revision effectively, so direct feedback from teachers can improve the efficiency of revision. For error types, teachers should adopt different feedback strategies according to errors, and like direct feedback is better than indirect feedback for more complex errors.

3.2. Positive Comments

Teachers usually focus on errors in structure and language when giving WCF with using negative comments. If learners find that teachers only give feedback on their own shortcomings, it is easier for them to feel anxiety in their writing, which is not conducive to the development of their language ability. If teachers can combine correction with encouragement, it is better to stimulate students' interest in writing, enhance feedback effect.

3.3. Combination of Focused Feedback and Unfocused Feedback

Teachers suggest that it should be closely related to the article itself, involving structure, language use and so on. On the other hand, teachers should also provide more applicable learning guidance at the end of the article like the sentence cohesion and the main ideas of the topic to promote students' writing ability and make progress in the next English writing. Teachers can also state their views and feelings about learners' writing. Teachers' feedback should not only pay attention to the accuracy of students' writing ability, but also pay attention to the overall content of the article, so as to fundamentally improve students' writing ability in an all-round way. (Xiao Pingfei and Liu Xinting, 2021)

3.4. Pay Attention to the Writing and Expression of WCF

The writing and expression of comments should fully consider the learners. If students can't understand the teacher's feedback because of their scribbled comments or obscure expressions, the effect of feedback will be greatly reduced, which will have a negative impact on composition revision.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, WCF requires a combination of different methods and strategies. Teachers should consider the needs and abilities of their learners and select appropriate correction techniques. By providing efficient feedback, teachers can help learners improve their writing ability.

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