

The Effects of Focused Direct Written Corrective Feedback on Learners' Written Compositions

Qian Zou

China West Normal University, China

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of focused direct written corrective feedback on learners' written compositions within a theoretical framework. Emphasizing clarity, conciseness, and specificity in feedback provision is found to enhance writing accuracy and fluency significantly. The benefits of such feedback extend beyond specific tasks, facilitating skills transfer to diverse writing contexts and contributing to academic success. Future research should examine the effects of feedback types on writing proficiency, their sustainability, and interactions with other variables. Educators should aim to deliver timely, comprehensive feedback, integrate self-assessment practices, and leverage technology to establish an empowering feedback culture for students. In conclusion, focused direct written corrective feedback proves to be a crucial tool for educators in fostering writing skills among learners. With ongoing exploration and innovation, this approach promises to produce more skilled and confident writers in the future.

Keywords

Focused Direct Written Corrective Feedback; Learners' Written Compositions; Writing Proficiency.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Writing is a complex skill that is essential for effective communication in various academic and professional contexts. In the realm of language learning and teaching, writing instruction is a critical component of language programs, as it not only develops students' linguistic abilities but also enhances their critical thinking and creativity. In light of the claim proposed by Corder (1967) arguing that errors are an essential part in language teaching and learning, so as to accelerate the learning process, providing students with written corrective feedback (WCF) in teaching has been appreciated by many language teachers.

Written corrective feedback is a common method of feedback that language teachers adopt in writing teaching. Several studies have explored the effectiveness of direct corrective feedback on learners' written compositions in different contexts and with various target languages. While some research has shown positive outcomes in terms of error reduction and improvement in students' writing proficiency, other studies have raised questions about the impact of such feedback on learners' motivation, autonomy, and long-term writing development.

Thus, this study seeks to investigate the effects of focused direct written corrective feedback on learners' written compositions. The study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on effective writing instruction and feedback practices in language learning contexts.

1.2. Significance and Purpose of the Study

This research study focusing on analyzing the effects of providing focused direct written corrective feedback on learners' written compositions holds significant importance within the realm of language learning and teaching. By delving into the impact of direct feedback on various facets of writing proficiency, such as accuracy and fluency, this study aims to deepen our understanding of effective writing instruction practices.

Drawing upon influential literature in the field, including works by Ellis (2007), Smith and Johnson (2017), and Lyster (2004), this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the existing discourse on language learning and feedback mechanisms. The ultimate goal is to provide practical implications for language teachers and educators, helping them refine their feedback practices to better support students' development as proficient writers in language learning contexts. Through this research, we seek to not only advance scholarly knowledge but also offer tangible guidance for improving writing instruction and feedback provision to enhance students' language proficiency and writing skills effectively.

2. Definitions and Theoretical Basis

2.1. Related Terms

2.1.1. Focused Direct Written Corrective Feedback

In the field of SLA, feedback is generally used to refer to teachers' responses to their students' writing, and corrective feedback (CF) has been regarded to be "of eternal concern to L2 teachers" (Kepner, 1991) as it indicates learners that their use of the target structure is ungrammatical. Lalande (1982) defines CF as "any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong." Keh (1990) regarded CF as a fundamental element of a process approach to writing and defined it as input given to the writer from the reader with the effect of providing information for the writer for revision. In 2007, Ellis provided a further and more precise definition of CF as the responses to learner utterance which contains an error.

Compared with oral CF, which refers to the verbal information provided to L2 learners by instructors, WCF refers to the written information provided to L2 learners about the ill-formedness of their written production (Loewen, 2012).

In light of different criteria, WCF can be classified into different categories. According to the source of feedback, it can be divided into teacher WCF and peer WCF, according to the focus of feedback, it can be divided into form-focused WCF and content-focused WCF; according to the degree of salience, it can be divided into direct WCF and indirect WCF. Direct WCF, the focus of the present study, means that the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form for the student, whereas indirect WCF refers to the method through which teachers only point out the mistakes students make and do not give the correct form, leaving students themselves to diagnose and correct them.

2.2. Theoretical Basis

2.2.1. Noticing Hypothesis

Noticing Hypothesis lays a solid theoretical foundation for WCF. According to Schmidt (1994), who proposed and elaborated on Noticing Hypothesis, noticing is an essential and sufficient condition that helps learners convert input to intake in that "what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning" (Schmidt, 1995). In other words, input does not become intake for language learning unless it is noticed by learners.

Noticing involves the allocation of focal attention and rehearsal in short-term memory and is argued to be a necessary condition for SLA. In WCF, if learners notice the feedback provided by the instructor, they are likely to get their knowledge gap. The distinction between focused and

unfocused WCF has put “noticing” in a crucial place, and if the feedback provided to the learners is focused, errors are more salient than those which are unfocused.

2.2.2. Interaction Hypothesis

While Long's Interaction Hypothesis was originally designed with oral communication in mind, it is equally applicable to written communication. In Long's (1996) revised Interaction Hypothesis, he proposed two types of input: positive evidence and negative evidence. Positive evidence is essentially the provision of what is grammatically correct, representing comprehensible input. Krashen (1981) claimed that comprehensible input alone was responsible for language acquisition. However, Long's (1996) review of comprehensible input found that it was insufficient by comprehensible input itself to account for acquisition. The role of positive evidence, or rather, modified comprehensible input is usable but not enough for acquisition. As to those strings of words which are not grammatical sentences in the language, the reader can give the information on corrections of other forms of feedback to the writer or speaker, which is what Long (1996) has referred to as negative evidence. The role of negative evidence is to provide modified CF about errors, and this serves to facilitate acquisition through cognitive processes deemed to underlie acquisition. Long (1996) held that through negotiation for meaning, which led to interaction modification facilitating acquisition as it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways, learners could notice the discrepancy between what they knew about the target language, which is their interlanguage, and the correct form of the target language.

2.2.3. Comprehensible Output Hypothesis.

According to Long (1996), input alone, or rather, the comprehensible input raised by Krashen (1985), is not the only true cause of second language acquisition and input was insufficient by itself to account for acquisition. In the same vein, Swain (1985) proposed Comprehensible Output Hypothesis where she maintained that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language teaching.

Developed by Swain & Lapkin (1995), Comprehensible Output Hypothesis states that learning takes place when a learner encounters a gap in his or her linguistic knowledge of L2. By noticing this gap, the learner becomes aware of it and may be able to modify his output so that he learns something new about the language. Although the two researchers did not claim that comprehensible output is solely responsible for all or even most language acquisition, they claimed that, under some conditions, comprehensible output facilitates second language learning in ways that differ from and enhance input due to the mental processes connected with the production of language. As a matter of fact, this hypothesis is also closely related to Noticing Hypothesis. Swain (1995) defines three functions of output: noticing function, hypothesis-testing function and metalinguistic function. For noticing function, it means when learners want to speak or write something in a foreign language, they are highly likely to encounter gaps between what they want to say and what they are able to say, so that they notice what they do not know or only know partially in this language. Hypothesis-testing function means when a learner says something, there is always an at least tacit hypothesis underlying his or her utterance, such as one particular grammatical form. By uttering something, the learner is able to test this hypothesis and receives feedback from an interlocutor. Metalinguistic function means learners reflect on the language they learn, and thereby the output enables them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge. All of the three functions can be realized when teachers give language learners WCF on errors they have made in writing.

3. Strategies for Providing Focused Direct Written Corrective Feedback

3.1. Using Direct and Explicit Language

When utilizing direct and explicit language in providing focused direct written corrective feedback, it is essential to clearly and precisely identify specific errors and areas for improvement in the student's writing. By using language that is straightforward and to the point, educators can effectively convey the necessary corrections and suggestions for enhancement, ensuring that students understand exactly what needs to be addressed in their works (Ferris, 2010). For instance, rather than simply circling a verb error, a teacher could write, "This verb is in the wrong tense. It should be 'wrote' instead of 'write'". This direct approach helps to streamline the feedback process and allows students to easily grasp the key points for revision, ultimately facilitating their growth and development as writers.

3.2. Focusing on Key Issues

Focusing on key issues is an essential component in delivering direct, targeted written corrective feedback. When educators concentrate on specific areas requiring improvement, they are able to provide tailored guidance that resonates with students and boosts their writing proficiency (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). For instance, rather than just identifying general grammar errors in a student's essay, a teacher could choose to zone in on correcting recurring subject-verb agreement inaccuracies. By emphasizing this critical issue and offering clear explanations and illustrative examples, students can gain a better grasp of the problem and effectively address it, leading to enhanced learning outcomes.

3.3. Regular Review and Follow-up

Regular review and follow-up are crucial strategies for providing focused direct written corrective feedback. By revisiting previously identified areas of improvement and following up with students on their progress, educators can ensure consistent growth and reinforcement of learning (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). For example, after highlighting subject-verb agreement errors in a student's essay and providing guidance on how to address them, a teacher can schedule a follow-up session to review new assignments and track the student's improvement in this specific area. This ongoing review and follow-up process not only helps students stay on track with their writing development but also demonstrates the teacher's commitment to their continuous improvement.

3.4. Emphasizing Positive Feedback

Emphasizing positive feedback in conjunction with corrective feedback has been shown to be effective in enhancing student learning outcomes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). By highlighting students' strengths alongside areas for improvement, educators can increase motivation and confidence in learners. For instance, acknowledging a student's effective use of descriptive language in a narrative essay while also providing constructive feedback on punctuation errors can encourage a growth mindset and ongoing improvement in writing skills. This balanced approach to feedback promotes a supportive learning environment and empowers students to engage actively in the learning process.

4. The Impacts of Focused Direct Written Corrective Feedback on Writing Skills

4.1. The Effects on Accuracy and Fluency

The effects of focused direct written corrective feedback on writing skills, specifically in terms of accuracy and fluency, have been widely studied in the field of second language writing. Research by Truscott (2007) indicated that providing direct corrective feedback on linguistic

errors can significantly enhance the accuracy of students' writing by drawing attention to specific language problems and offering clear explanations for correction. Moreover, studies have shown that targeted feedback helps improve the fluency of writing by guiding students to use appropriate language structures and vocabulary more proficiently (Ferris, 2010). Through such focused feedback, learners are able to refine their writing skills, ultimately leading to improved accuracy and fluency in their written expression.

4.2. Transferability to Other Tasks and Contexts

The transferability of focused direct written corrective feedback to other tasks and contexts is a crucial aspect of its impact on writing skills. Research by Ellis and Shintani (2014) has highlighted the transferability of focused direct written corrective feedback to other tasks and contexts in improving writing skills. Their study demonstrated that targeted feedback not only contributes to immediate improvements in writing accuracy and fluency but also helps learners apply language principles across various writing assignments and real-world communication situations. By providing explicit corrections and explanations for errors, students develop a more comprehensive understanding of language structures, leading to enhanced writing proficiency in diverse academic and professional contexts.

4.3. Long-term Implications for Academic Success

The long-term implications of focused direct written corrective feedback on writing skills for academic success are substantial and have been extensively researched. Studies, such as those by Bitchener and Storch (2016), have shown that sustained exposure to targeted feedback not only results in immediate improvements in writing proficiency but also cultivates a growth mindset and a proactive attitude towards learning. Through consistent engagement with corrective feedback, students develop a heightened self-awareness of their writing strengths and weaknesses, fostering a continuous cycle of self-improvement. This iterative process of feedback and revision not only enhances writing skills but also contributes to overall academic achievement and success in various educational pursuits. By internalizing the feedback received, students are better equipped to apply their refined writing skills across different academic contexts, ultimately paving the way for long-term academic excellence.

5. Future Directions and Recommendations

5.1. Areas for Future Research on Feedback Effects

Research on feedback effects in writing instruction continues to evolve, presenting various opportunities for expansion and exploration. One key area for further research is investigating the differential impact of various types of feedback (e.g., corrective, praise, metalinguistic) on different aspects of writing proficiency. Understanding how different types of feedback influence language acquisition and writing skills can provide valuable insights into designing more effective feedback strategies in educational settings.

Furthermore, research could also delve into the long-term effects of feedback interventions on writing development. Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over an extended period could shed light on the sustainability and lasting benefits of feedback on writing skills. Additionally, exploring the interaction between feedback and other instructional factors, such as task complexity and learner characteristics, can offer a more nuanced understanding of how feedback can be optimized to support diverse learners effectively.

By addressing these research gaps, scholars can enhance our understanding of the intricate dynamics of feedback effects on writing instruction, leading to the development of more tailored and impactful feedback practices in language learning.

5.2. Practical Strategies for Educators

In moving forward, educators can implement several practical strategies to optimize the effectiveness of feedback in writing instruction. One key recommendation is to provide timely and specific feedback that addresses both global aspects of writing (e.g., content, organization) and local aspects (e.g., grammar, vocabulary). By focusing on a balance of macro-level and micro-level feedback, educators can help students improve their overall writing proficiency comprehensively.

Additionally, incorporating opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment and reflection can enhance the impact of feedback. Encouraging students to review their own writing, identify areas for improvement, and set goals for revision can promote metacognitive awareness and empower students to take ownership of their learning process.

Furthermore, utilizing technology tools, such as online writing platforms and feedback software, can streamline the feedback process and provide students with immediate access to corrective suggestions. Integrating technology in feedback delivery can increase efficiency and convenience while still maintaining the personalized nature of feedback interactions.

By incorporating these practical strategies into writing instruction, educators can create a supportive and empowering feedback environment that facilitates students' writing development effectively.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided a thorough exploration of the effects of focused direct written corrective feedback on learners' written compositions. By grounding our investigation in a robust theoretical framework, we have gained a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at play.

What's more, the study indicates that the strategies for providing focused direct written corrective feedback-which emphasize clarity, conciseness, and specificity-can significantly improve learners' writing accuracy and fluency. Furthermore, our study reveals that the benefits of focused direct written corrective feedback are not confined to a single task or context. Instead, learners are able to transfer the skills and insights gained from this type of feedback to other writing tasks and situations, ultimately enhancing their overall academic success.

As for future research, scholars should explore the impacts of feedback types on writing proficiency, their long-term benefits, and their interaction with other factors. Educators should provide timely, balanced feedback, incorporate self-assessment, and use technology to create an empowering feedback environment for students.

In conclusion, focused direct written corrective feedback has emerged as a valuable tool for educators seeking to foster writing development in their learners. With continued research and innovation, we are optimistic that its benefits will continue to multiply, ultimately leading to more skilled and confident writers.

References

- [1] Bitchener, J., & Ferris, D. (2012). *Written corrective feedback in second language acquisition and writing*. New York: Routledge.
- [2] Corder, S. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5, 161-169.
- [3] Chen Xiaoxiang, & Li Huina. (2009). The influence of teachers' written corrective feedback on students' English writing. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 41(5), 351-358.

- [4] Ellis, R. (2010). A framework for investigating oral and written corrective feedback. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 32, 335–349.
- [5] Ferris, D. (2010). Second language writing research and written corrective feedback in SLA: Intersections and practical applications. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 32(2), 181-201.
- [6] Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.
- [7] Keh, C. L. (1990). Feedback in the writing process: A model and methods for implementation. *ELT Journal*, 44(4), 194-394.
- [8] Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- [9] Kepner, C. G. (1991). An experiment in the relationship of types of written feedback to the development of second-language writing skills. *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 305-313.
- [10] Long, M. H. (1981). Input, interaction, and second language acquisition. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, 379(1), 259-278.
- [11] Lalande, J. F. (1982). Reducing composition errors: An experiment. *The Modern Language Journal*, 66, 140-149.
- [12] Liu Xiaojing. (2020). A study on the effectiveness of focused written corrective feedback on the cognitive load in English writing. *Modern English*, 11, 121-123.
- [13] Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive process they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 16, 371-391.
- [14] Shintani, N., Ellis, R., & Suzuki, W. (2014). Effects of written feedback and revision on learners' accuracy in using two English grammatical structures. *Language Learning*, 64, 103–131.
- [15] Truscott, J. (2007). The effect of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 255-272.
- [16] Wang Ying, & Liu Zhenqian. (2012). A study on the role of teachers' feedback in the accuracy, fluency, complexity and overall quality of English writing. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 33(6), 49-53.
- [17] Xiao Pingfei, & Liu Xinting. (2021). A study on the influence of direct focused and direct non-focused written corrective feedback on the acquisition of prepositions in English writing. *Computer-Assisted Foreign Language Education in China*, 3, 44-49.
- [18] Zhu Ye, & Wang Min. (2005). A study on feedback in second language writing: Forms, explicitness and specific effects. *Modern Foreign Language*, 28(2), 171-180.