

How to use Direct and Indirect Written Corrective Feedback in the Teaching of High Students' English Writing

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Abstract

Writing, as an expressive skill, is a comprehensive manifestation of linguistic proficiency and plays a vital role in English communication. With the rise of the process approach to teaching, research in the field of English writing instruction has shifted from a focus on outcome evaluation to an exploration of the writing process, during which teacher feedback, an indispensable part of the process, has attracted the attention of researchers. This paper explores the application of two primary forms of written corrective feedback (WCF)—direct and indirect—in the context of teaching English writing to high school students. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the study examines the effectiveness of these two feedback methods in enhancing students' writing skills. Through a comprehensive literature review, and an analysis of existing research, this paper argues that a balanced approach incorporating both direct and indirect WCF can be beneficial for high school students, promoting not only linguistic accuracy but also fostering a positive writing environment.

Keywords

Direct written corrective feedback; Indirect written corrective feedback; English writing

1. Introduction

Among the five basic English skills of listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing, writing plays a vital role in English language learning. Consequently, cultivating students' writing ability is an indispensable aspect of English language teaching. General Senior High School Curriculum Standards for English(2017) explicitly states that English writing primarily assesses students' writing proficiency, which includes three crucial aspects: fluency, accuracy, and appropriateness of language use. This underscores the Ministry of Education's specific requirements for the accuracy of students' English writing. However, teachers often struggle to find suitable methods to cultivate and enhance middle school students' writing, thereby drawing scholars' close attention to this issue.

Since the introduction of process approach in second language teaching, teacher feedback, as an integral part of this approach, has gradually become indispensable in writing instruction. How to enhance students' English writing accuracy through teacher feedback has emerged as a hot topic of research today. In recent years, scholars hold diverging views on the effectiveness of teachers' written corrective feedback (WCF). Some scholars, such as Truscott (1996, 2007), argue that teacher feedback has little impact on improving students' writing accuracy and may even have a negative effect. They contend that teachers' corrections, primarily focused on grammar, can elicit resistance from students, dampening their enthusiasm for writing. Conversely, proponents of the "feedback effectiveness theory" (Ferris 2001; Sheen 2007; Ashwell 2000) maintain that teacher feedback positively influences students' writing accuracy. In contrast, domestic research on teacher written feedback in second language writing is scarce (Li Jing 2011), with even fewer studies examining which type of feedback is more effective, the correction effectiveness for different types of errors, and the variations in its impact on learners at different language proficiency levels.

In light of this, the present study targets high school students, investigating the effectiveness and extent of teachers' written corrective feedback from the perspectives of direct and indirect feedback.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

Corrective feedback, a form of input designed to highlight learners' linguistic errors, has been a subject of much debate within the realm of second language acquisition (SLA) research. Sheppard's (1992) found that corrective feedback was not only ineffective, but harmful. Subsequent findings by Truscott (1996, 2007), Semke (1984), and numerous other empirical studies also agreed this, underscoring the lack of effectiveness in written corrective feedback. However, contemporary perspectives have undergone a significant shift, with an increasing number of scholars advocating the positive influence of corrective feedback in writing instruction. These proponents argue that teachers' corrective feedback constitutes a pivotal element in foreign language teaching, particularly in the realm of L2 writing.

In the realm of language instruction, corrective feedback is also called "negative evidence" or "negative feedback," reflecting its ability to facilitate learners' recognition of linguistic errors. Ellis (1990) clarified that error correction involves directing students to address errors based on the external manifestations of language use, specifically targeting individual linguistic errors to provide learners with negative evidence and draw their attention to the errors themselves. Lightbown and Spada (1999) elaborated that corrective feedback means various responses to learners' mistakes, ranging from direct to indirect or metalinguistic. Chaudron (1984) argued that "corrective feedback" is a more fitting term than "error correction," emphasizing that the latter carries a broader semantic scope, while the former solely focuses on the teacher's acknowledgment of students' in-

correct behavior, without emphasizing the teacher's effort to inform students of their errors. Consequently, this study adopts the term "corrective feedback," which has gained widespread adoption in recent researches.

In a word, written corrective feedback (WCF), refers to the corrective information that teachers provide to learners in written form. This feedback encourages learners to recognize their own linguistic errors and enhances their writing proficiency by guiding them to rectify these errors within their compositions. Through the ongoing process of correcting linguistic errors, learners gain insight into the gap between their current language usage and the target language, enabling them to gradually narrow this gap and approach the target language more closely.

2.2. Definition of Direct and Indirect Written Corrective Feedback(WCF)

To facilitate research into the effects of different types of written corrective feedback (WCF), Ellis (2009) summarized the categories of WCF. Based on the strategies employed in providing feedback, he specifically classified it into direct corrective feedback and indirect corrective feedback. The crucial distinction lies in whether the accurate form is explicitly presented. Direct WCF not only alerts to the presence of an error but also provides the corrected version, thereby includes both positive (correct form) and negative (error indication) evidence. In contrast, indirect WCF merely signals the occurrence of an error without directly offering the correct form, thus consisting solely negative evidence.

As noted by Ferris and Roberts (2001), direct correction can take various forms of feedback, such as crossing out unnecessary words, phrases, or morphemes, inserting missing words or morphemes, and writing the correct form above or near the erroneous form. Concurrently, Ferris and Roberts (2001) argue that direct feedback explicitly shows learners how to correct errors, and for lower-proficiency learners, direct feedback is more effective in facilitating learning than indirect feedback, albeit with potential limitations in long-term effectiveness.

Ellis (2009) defines indirect written corrective feedback as pointing out errors without providing the correct form. This can be achieved by underlining the errors, using symbols to indicate omissions in the student's text, or placing a cross in the margin next to the error. According to Ellis, indirect feedback may lead to better outcomes than direct feedback because it guides students in learning and helps them address difficulties (Lalande, 1982). Ferris and Roberts (2001) argue that, compared to direct feedback, indirect feedback encourages students to reflect on linguistic forms and may result in more long-lasting effects.

2.3. Relevant Studies of the Effectiveness of Direct and Indirect WCF at Home and Abroad

The debate surrounding the comparative efficacy of direct and indirect written corrective feedback (WCF) has been a prominent theme in empirical research on WCF. Despite numerous studies conducted, the findings remain inconclusive, failing to conclusively establish the superiority of one form over the other. Most previous researches, including

those by, suggest that direct WCF, which provides learners with the correct linguistic form, fosters second language (L2) learning more effectively than indirect WCF, which encourages self-correction.

However, a meta-analysis by Kang and Han (2015), encompassing 22 empirical studies on WCF, challenged this notion by revealing no statistically significant difference between the two feedback types, albeit with a marginally larger effect size for direct WCF. This finding implies that the effectiveness of a particular feedback approach might be contingent upon additional factors, such as learners' L2 proficiency levels.

More recent research has further complicated the picture, with studies like Kim et al. (2020) presenting evidence that challenges the traditional view of direct WCF's dominance. For instance, Schmidt, R. (1990) observed no discernible difference in the improvement of learners' use of the indefinite article and past perfect tense in English between those who received direct and indirect WCF. Similarly, Shao et al. (2023) found that both direct and indirect WCF had an equally beneficial impact on the acquisition of past counterfactual conditionals, as assessed through receptive and written production tasks. One possible reason for the conflicting results from previous studies is that few of them have considered the role of individual differences in the effectiveness of direct and indirect WCF.

3. Measures of using direct and indirect WCF to improve students' writing

3.1. Teachers' Emphasis on WCF in English Writing

First and foremost, teachers' written corrective feedback (WCF), both direct and indirect, can be instrumental in enhancing the precision of students' English writing skills. Consequently, senior high school English teachers ought to prioritize and devote greater attention to this aspect of teaching. It is imperative for English educators to dedicate time to providing thoughtful and constructive comments on students' essays.

3.2. Differentiated WCF Based on Proficiency and Errors

Secondly, when addressing students' errors, a combination of direct and indirect written corrective feedback proves more efficacious. For novice learners, explicitly pointing out mistakes and furnishing them with corrected forms enables swift recognition of their linguistic deficiencies and weaknesses in application. Conversely, for advanced students, over time, indirect WCF becomes more advantageous in enhancing writing precision. Consequently, tailoring WCF strategies to individual students' proficiency levels is imperative. Furthermore, the blend of direct and indirect WCF is contingent upon the nature of errors. Direct WCF excels in tackling intricate errors, offering learners accurate syntactic rules and interpretations, thereby facilitating mastery and appropriate application in subsequent writings. Alternatively, indirect WCF is better suited for superficial errors, serving as cues for students to self-correct. It is recommended that direct WCF be employed to rectify complex errors, notably syntactic ones, where teachers should impart

precise syntactic guidelines for learners to grasp and apply accurately in their new compositions.

3.3. Inclusion of Peer and Self-correction in Feedback

Thirdly, teacher feedback can be augmented by incorporating peer feedback and self-correction. According to previous researches, there are several students expressing a desire to receive feedback from their peers, as they perceive it as a valuable opportunity to learn from others' perspectives. Self-correction, on the other hand, empowers students with autonomous learning and problem-solving skills. Both peer feedback and self-correction align with learner-centered teaching and learning methodologies, fostering an environment where students take an active role in their educational journey.

3.4. WCF on Writing Organization and Content

Lastly, it is equally crucial to offer feedback on the organization and content of students' writing. While the accuracy of writing holds paramount importance in English composition, students also anticipate guidance on how to enhance their organization and content. This feedback can be conveyed through English comments, thereby providing additional exposure to the target language. These comments can be both positive, aimed at encouraging students, and negative, intended to pinpoint areas for improvement in their writing.

4. Conclusion

In this newly created file, highlight all of the contents and import your prepared text file. You are now ready to style your paper. Writing, one of the five basic skills, is a comprehensive indication of one's comprehensive language proficiency, which is also an indispensable aspect of English teaching. With the wide application of Process Writing Approach in second language writing teaching, teachers' written corrective feedback has become an important part of English writing teaching. There are two types of teacher's written corrective feedback, namely, the direct and indirect WCF. Although researches about whether teachers' written corrective feedback can improve students' English writing and which type is more effective have not reach an consensus, the direct and indirect WCF are to different extent proved effective. Therefore, a few measures of using direct and indirect WCF to improve students' writing are concerned. Firstly, it is suggested English teachers should dedicate time to providing thoughtful and constructive comments on students' essays. Secondly, direct and indirect WCF should be combined to give to different levels of students. Thirdly, peer feedback and self-correction can be used to supplement teacher feedback. Finally, feedback on the organization and content of writing should also be provided.

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