

## The Role of Written Corrective Feedback Provision in Enhancing Learners Writing Capacities

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Receipt date : 13/03/2019 ; Acceptance Date: 08/09/2019 ; Publishing date:28/02/2022

**Abstract.** Writing has a central position in the field of EFL composition research. Therefore, student writers have to work harder to develop their writing capacities. This development is assured through effective instruction and guidance and more particularly, error feedback. In fact, this issue is very controversial among researchers as some of them argued for its ineffectiveness claiming that it is harmful and it should be abandoned. Others however, have completely different views pointing out that written feedback is helpful in developing the writing skill. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of the written corrective feedback (WCF) provided by teachers of English at El Oued University, Algeria, to the students' writing. The hypothesis which is put forward in this research states that WCF does have a positive effect on the students' writing abilities when it is delivered during the process approach. The research makes an experimental study, in which WCF is delivered to students' first drafts and then giving them the opportunity to revise and write a second draft. The findings of the research have clearly shown, via the analysis of WCF, that students' errors have been considerably minimized which indicates that an improvement has been taken place. The research has had some important implications for EFL writing teachers especially in developing their own techniques in providing appropriate and thorough feedback which entails time and effort on the teachers' part and which ultimately will assist student writers in enhancing their writing abilities.

**Keywords.** EFL, process approach, written corrective feedback, writing.

ملخص للكتابة مكانة مركزية في مجال أبحاث تكوين اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. لذلك ، يتعين على الطلاب العمل بجدية أكبر لتطوير قدراتهم على الكتابة. ولضمان هذا التطوير يجب توفر تعليمات وإرشادات فعالة. هذه الورقة هي محاولة لاستقصاء فعالية التعليقات التصحيحية المكتوبة المقدمة من قبل معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الوادي. تنص الفرضية التي تم طرحها في هذا البحث على أن التعليقات المكتوبة لها تأثير إيجابي على قدرات الطلاب على الكتابة عندما يتم إعطاؤها أثناء عملية الكتابة. بإتباع المقاربة العملية. يقوم البحث بإجراء دراسة تجريبية ، يتم فيها تسليم التعليقات المكتوبة إلى المسودات الأولى للطلاب ومن ثم منحهم الفرصة لمراجعة وكتابة مسودة ثانية. أظهرت نتائج البحث بوضوح، من خلال تحليل التعليقات المكتوبة ، أن أخطاء الطلاب قد انخفضت إلى حد كبير مما يشير إلى حدوث تحسن. كان لهذا البحث بعض الآثار المهمة لمعلمي الكتابة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية خاصة في تطوير أساليبهم الخاصة في تقديم تعليقات مكتوبة مناسبة وشاملة تستلزم وقتًا وجهدًا من جانب المعلمين والتي ستساعد في نهاية المطاف الطلاب في تعزيز قدراتهم على الكتابة.

الكلمات المفتاحية . الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، المقاربة العملية ، التعليقات المكتوبة، الكتابة

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## Introduction

Teaching the writing skill is still considered to be one of the most challenging tasks for both ESL and EFL teachers as it entails teachers to allot more time and effort so as to help learners write better. This is particularly true when it comes to the assessment of students' written performances which is a time-consuming, tedious task. Indeed, writing assessment and evaluation do not lie exclusively in assigning grades but rather it involves the delivery of comments and feedback that will potentially help students develop their writing abilities.

As a matter of fact, responding to student writing is an important aspect of EFL composition research. Error feedback on writing, in particular is still an issue of lively debate and there has been a controversy among scholars and teachers regarding the role of error feedback in helping students learn how to write efficiently. Some researchers have pointed out that excessive correction could demotivate and discourage student writers and it may be harmful.

The research that is conducted is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of the written feedback provided by the teachers of English at El Oued University to the students' writing putting forward the following questions:

1. What are the main types of written feedback given to students?
2. Is the feedback effective in improving the students' writing abilities?

The hypothesis that is advanced in this study is the following

1. The written feedback does have a positive effect on the students' writing abilities especially when it focuses on both the content and the form.

### 1- Review of the literature:

In the following section a review of the literature about the effects of the written feedback is presented in order to understand the historical development of the phenomenon under study. At first, it is worth noting that the effectiveness of teacher feedback has been examined in different ways, yet the findings have not been conclusive and sometimes even contradictory.

Much of the research that has been conducted in the area of teacher feedback in L2 composition has most often investigated: (1) the effect of various feedback focus (i.e. content vs. form) on student writing; (2) student preferences for different feedback focus and techniques; and (3) students' reactions to feedback already received on their writing. This research has consistently shown that students welcome and value feedback.

The period after the 1970s witnessed the domination of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This theory has emphasised the communicative function of the language. In this framework, writing teachers have attempted to help their students gain fluency in writing. Free writing was a popular technique used frequently in the classroom.

Since then, some First Language (L1) teachers and scholars have taken interest in the writing process, rather than the product itself (Sommers, 1980). Being influenced by L1 research, many L2 researchers have applied the process approach to L2 writing (Keh, 1990, Raimes, 1984; Semke, 1984, Zamel, 1980,1985). Zamel (1980) suggested that the purpose of composing should help students express their feelings, experiences, and opinions. This approach emphasises the ongoing steps of students writing from prewriting to post-writing such as brainstorming, planning, drafting, rewriting, and editing (Keh, 1990). The act of writing is considered to be a matter of communication between a reader and a writer, and it is not restricted to grammar practice.

Feedback in the process approach emphasises the reader's (teacher or peer's) response regarding the content and organisation and leaves grammatical accuracy to the final editing phase. Therefore, advocators of the process approach have often argued that overt error correction may hinder the development of fluent writing (Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985). Zamel

(1985) examined whether error correction was effective in improving grammatical accuracy in compositions by comparing students who had given correction on grammar with those who had been provided with feedback only on content. She reported that no significant difference was found in accuracy of composing between the two groups throughout the experimental period. In the aspect of content, however, students who were given content feedback only were superior to those who were given grammar feedback only.

Another study was conducted by Semke (1984). She studied the effects of four different methods of responding on L2 students' writing. These methods were:

- 1) Writing comments and questions without corrections
- 2) Marking all errors and correcting them
- 3) Combining positive comments with corrections, and
- 4) Indicating errors by coding them and asking students to rewrite their papers correcting the errors.

The results of the study showed that correction neither improved students' writing skills nor did it reinforce their general language proficiency. Instead, they may negatively affect students' attitudes, especially those who are forced to make the corrections themselves.

Truscott's (1996) article remains the most debatable as he does not attribute the 'failure' or grammar feedback to any sort of inadequacy cause by teachers, students, or teaching contexts but because of the feedback itself. Therefore, he rejects the idea at all. He, however, gives what seems strong evidence that grammar feedback is simply a waste of time and effort for both teachers and students. He goes further and claims that grammar feedback is not only ineffective but it can be harmful too. Therefore, he recommends writing teachers to abandon giving feedback that corrects grammatical errors. His reasons for his stance are that grammatical correction has harmful effects in terms of teachers' intervention in complex learning processes by simply adopting a "simplistic view at learning as essentially the transfer of information from teacher to student" (Truscott 1996:342). Teaching practices that rely on transfer of knowledge with no concern for the process underlying the development of the language system are according to him, 'not promising'. He also argues that learning is most successful when the classroom becomes more enjoyable and out of stress. Correction, however, encourages exactly the opposite. Another point he states that what makes grammar correction 'counterproductive' is the time factor. Students will spend a lot of time reading, reflecting, and correcting their errors instead of doing "more productive learning strategies" Truscott (1996, 355). The time factor seems even more urgent with teachers. He believes that "grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned" (p. 328). Truscott's reaction to the two presumably valid reasons for giving feedback which are: 1) that not giving feedback will lead to errors fossilisation and 2) that students themselves want their errors to be corrected is that correction does not help students' accuracy and may well damage it and it should therefore be, once again, abandoned as that "will not have any harmful effect on accuracy (or anything else)." (p. 360).

Truscott's disputed views have been critically and empirically examined by many subsequent studies. That is to be supported with early studies whose findings have been neglected in Truscott's controversial paper. Some of these studies give practical evidence that grammar correction in fact does help students improve their accuracy as opposed to Truscott. The main weak point of Truscott's paper is that most of the literature he used to support his claims is actually researches that have been carried out in L1 contexts which cannot be transferred completely to ESL contexts as the students in the latter environment struggle with their L2 and errors are definitely expected from them. In an earlier study which also contrasts Truscott's; Lalande (1982) passionately believes that correction of errors is defended. Lalande (1982:140) asserts that "unless all errors are identified, the faulty linguistic structures, rather than the correct ones, may become ingrained in the students' interlanguage system".

Other researchers had examined the stand point of Truscott. Lee (1997), for example, describes Truscott's stance as 'radical'. Furthermore, Lee expects that his beliefs will have little impact on classroom teachers. Another researcher who substantially examined Truscott's beliefs is Dana Ferris (1999). First of all, she notes that L2 students themselves are very much concerned about accuracy and they will ask for their errors to be corrected by their teachers. In response to Truscott's claims which state that giving grammar correction feedback must have no place in writing courses and should be abandoned; Ferris describes his idea as "premature and overtly strong" (p.2). Ferris (1999) also notes that Truscott overstates the negative evidence and disregard the research results that contradict his views. Two significant studies that Truscott disregards their positive findings are Fathman and Whalley (1990) and that of Lalande (1982) where both found positive effects for error correction.

Ferris (1999) cites three reasons why teachers shall continue providing feedback. First, surveys show that students' opinion about teacher feedback asserts that receiving grammar correction from teachers has been of great importance. Second, studies on the subject of university instructors' perception of ESL students' errors in comparison with the native students' errors. Teachers feel that students' linguistic errors are burdensome and affect their overall evaluation of student papers. Finally and most importantly, it is critical that students become more "self-sufficient in editing their own writing" (p. 8). Ashwell (2000) also responded to Truscott's (1996) ideas concerning grammar correction and suggests that many teachers correct their students written work because they believe that the students will achieve a good level of accuracy in subsequent writings. Other teachers may give surface-level corrections because they believe that this type of feedback will help in the avoidance of fossilisation of errors. Last but not least, Chandler (2003) carried out a study which empirically proves that corrections of grammar and lexis (sentence-level errors) between assignments reduce such errors in subsequent writing without reducing fluency or quality, a finding that strongly opposes Truscott's. Unlike Truscott, Chandler (2003) recommends teachers to give error feedback and require students to make correction if they want to increase accuracy in student writing.

In this section, some of the related studies that have dealt with the issue of the effectiveness of written feedback have been discussed. Yet, it is important to say that these studies have to be enhanced according to Ferris (2004) who has done a lot in this area. She claimed that

We need to think of ways to carry out longitudinal, carefully designed, replicable studies that compare the writing of the students receiving error feedback with that of students who receive none, as well as comparing and controlling for other aspects of error treatment. [...] there is positive evidence from various lines of research, SLA studies, short-term experimental studies of error correction in L2 writing, longitudinal studies of improvement, and reactions and views of students themselves. (Ferris, 2004: 60)

It is clear that there is a lot of research that needs to be carried about the effectiveness of written corrective feedback on the long-term improvement of the students' writing capacities.

## **2. Research Method**

**2.1. Context of the Study.** The present study has taken place in the Department of English language at El-Oued University during the academic year 2017/2018. The purpose of taking third year students of English as a case study lies in the fact that at this level students have more practice on academic writing and essays not exclusively in the written expression class, but also in exams such as literature, civilisation and so on.

The department of English has been inaugurated in 2008 adopting directly the LMD system which has become the norm in all Algerian universities. As a consequence, that department needs more experience and knowledge for the effective implementation of that system which naturally come from constant research on language teaching and its different areas such as writing which is the subject of the current research which deals with writing problems and written corrective feedback's effects.

**2.2. Participants.** The participants of this study were 30 third year students of English at El Oued university with two teachers as examiners. It is worth noting that all the participants have agreed to take part in this study providing that their privacy is preserved.

**2.3. Instruments.** In order to understand and examine the written corrective feedback that teachers provide to their students, a corpus of first and second drafts is collected during the experimental study whereby students have been instructed to write an essay about one of the three suggested topics (see appendix A). The students' writing performances are analysed in order to discover whether there are any writing problems in the first place and to see if there is any improvement after the written feedback provision in the first draft. Writing problems are going to be counted and classified.

**2.4. Procedures.** The analysis of these assignments aims on the one hand, at identifying the areas of writing difficulties, and at checking whether the provision of written corrective feedback at different stages of the writing process is helpful on the other. In so doing, a calculation and classification of the errors are carried out according to errors' nature; grammatical, spelling, vocabulary, syntactic, and mechanics, as well as the organisation of ideas. After that, a comparison of the number of these errors in the second drafts with the first one is made. Obviously, any decrease of errors' number in the second assignments indicates a significant improvement implying that the written corrective feedback has a positive impact on developing the students' writing competency.

**2.5. Data Analysis.** The written corrective feedback that was provided by the two participant teachers in the experimental study was diversified. Teachers have delivered a variety of comments that cover the linguistic aspect (grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, etc) and discursive (coherence and unity). In addition, the feedback was sometimes direct where teachers have given the correct form and it was often indirect where examiners have just underlined or circled the error leaving the opportunity for the learners to use their self-correction abilities. However, some of the general comments have been provided. As for the feedback's time, it was offered on the first draft and at different stages of the writing process (brainstorming, selection of appropriate ideas, and sentences' construction). Once students finished their first draft, teachers have intervened and handed them back to them for revision and improvement. In the following point, errors in both first and second drafts are counted and compared so as to verify the effectiveness of the written corrective feedback being provided.

### 2.5.1. Students' First Draft

The analysis of students' first drafts has revealed that teachers have given some marginal comments which are shown in the following table1. These comments are categorised in two types; positive and negative.

**Table.1: Teachers' Comments Total Number**

Comments	N	%
Positive	6	30
Negative	14	70
Total	20	100

The above table shows that examiners have provided both negative and positive comments and that (70%) are negative. The effect of these comments on the students' writing

depends essentially on the nature of that comment as it could encourage the learner to improve or even to demotivate him/her. From the corpus analysis, it can be said that the majority of comments are constructive and beneficial. Here are some of them:

Positive:

- Excellent and straightforward writing
- Good attempt
- Good arguments + good ideas

Negative:

- Very short conclusion
- Summarise the body of ideas in one or two sentences for the statement
- One sentence cannot conclude an essay
- Is it English?
- Try to organise your ideas

Additionally, the analysis of the first drafts has clearly shown that students have a lot of writing problems that cover a lot of areas of language as shown in table.2 and hence this finding confirms the hypothesis.

**Table.2: Students' Errors' Types in the First Draft**

Errors' Types	N	%
Grammatical	132	34.28
Vocabulary	19	4.93
Spelling	118	30.64
Mechanics	103	26.75
Ideas' coherence	13	3.37
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

It can be noticed from the above table that more than one third of the errors are grammatical (34.28%) and another third of spelling (30.64%) in addition to more than a quarter of mechanics' errors (26.75%) that concern punctuation and capitalisation. However, other aspects of difficulty have been revealed with less frequency such as vocabulary (4.93%) and coherence of ideas (3.37%). Consequently, it is imperative that a solution and remedial actions have to be taken to minimise the quantity of these errors in writing such as the provision of feedback and continuous, regular and dynamic assessment.

### 2.5.2. Students' Second Draft

During the experimental study, examiners have corrected students' writing performances and provided the necessary comments and written corrective feedback in order to help students recognise their areas of weakness in writing. So, second drafts have been analysed and errors have been counted and put in table.3 below.

**Table.3: Students' Errors' Types in the Second Draft**

Errors' Types	N	%
Grammatical	54	24.65
Vocabulary	8	3.65
Spelling	81	36.98
Mechanics	68	31.05
Ideas' Coherence	8	3.65
<b>Total</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>100</b>

As shown in table 3, students have manifested areas of linguistic weaknesses in the second draft with nearly the same proportion as in the first draft with approximately a quarter of grammatical errors (24.65%) and more than a third of spelling errors (36.98%) and another third of mechanics (31.05%). Therefore, it can be said that the types of errors in both drafts are consistent in the sense that students have the same degree of difficulty (see figure1)

despite the fact that a feedback has been provided. However, this does not mean that there was an improvement taking place, on the contrary the number of errors has been minimised, a point to be discussed in terms of figures in the following section.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In this part, a comparison of the number of errors is made between the first and second draft in order to trace any improvement. As it has been said before, any decrease in the number of errors indicates that the written corrective feedback that has been given by the examiners has a positive effect on students' writing. As it is shown in the table above, the overall number of errors has been decreased in the second draft in comparison with the first one. Firstly, grammatical errors have decreased in number from 132 errors in the first draft to 54 errors in the second draft. Likewise, spelling errors have moved from 118 errors to 81 errors the same goes for errors of mechanics which went down from 103 errors to 68 errors.

The above comparison indicates that there has been an improvement in students' writing after the provision of written corrective feedback in the first draft that is translated in the decrease of the number of these errors. Having said that, it worth noting that, students have repeated the same errors (fossilisation) despite the provision of corrections especially with regard to spelling and grammar. This phenomenon has to be dealt with through encouraging students to make use of dictionaries and grammar books frequently in their revisions of first drafts as well as inciting students to share their works with their peers (peer feedback). All in all, the examiners intervention has proved to be effective through the above obtained results which lead to the fact that teachers have to pay more attention to the comments they provide to their students' writings.

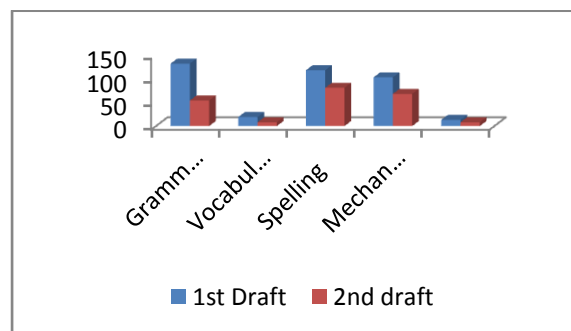


Figure.1: Students' Errors in First and Second Drafts

#### Conclusion

The writing skill occupies an important position in any foreign language teaching. However, many students in the Algerian context have serious problems of writing. This study has dealt with the evaluation of the writing skill which constitutes a crucial part of its teaching. In other words, an interest has been given to the effects of the written corrective feedback on the development of the students' writing abilities. Throughout this study, it has been shown that learners are in need of guidance and effective instruction that teachers should be aware of.

The experimental study has revealed that learners of English manifest a lot of writing problems of all sorts which can be overcome through the provision of effective written corrective feedback during the process of writing. Consequently, teachers of English have to give the written feedback more importance and they have to be aware of their learners' needs and lacks. Effective writing course does not lie exclusively in good instruction, evaluation and sustained assessment through feedback delivery contributes substantially to the student writers' development.

In conclusion, it is quite safe to say that the written feedback constitutes a crucial element in any writing course and teachers should not overlook its significance in the long term.

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## Appendix A

In a short essay (of 3 to 4 paragraphs) discuss any of the following:

- 1- Social networks are changing the way we perceive the world
- 2- With the increasing number of population communicating via the internet and text messaging , face to face communication will become a thing of the past
- 3- Discuss the advantages of learning foreign languages