



TEACHER'S FEEDBACK ON EFL STUDENTS' WRITING ERRORS: DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT



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ABSTRACT

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Teacher feedback on EFL students' writing is essential in the teaching and learning process. While a large body of research has focused on treatment of errors and content feedback in general, little has been done about the types of mistakes that students can overcome by themselves and how comments on contents should be worded. There are two major causes of errors: first language interference and developmental factors. The former type is harder for learners to overcome and the latter category can be gradually improved by their own efforts. This paper serves dual purposes: diagnosis and treatment. First, it examines types of errors that could be fixed by students with teacher's assistance. Second, it looks into how content feedback should be worded. It specifically analyzes marginal and final comments broken into five categories to see how these types of content feedback help students improve their rewrites. It was found that errors with subject-verb agreement and with nouns used for generic references belong to developmental errors and, thus they do not need teacher's intervention; teacher's comments with directions/suggestions and questions for clarification are the most effective for students to improve their rewrites.

Contribution/ Originality: This paper contributes to the literature on EFL writing feedback in the context where the educational culture is heavily teacher-centered. It provides an insight into how teachers' feedback and comments may help students improve their subsequent drafts and points out that teacher's intervention of student's written errors should be selective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The process writing approach has been dominant in EFL/ESL composition classes since the 1980s (Adula, 2018; Huang & Jun, 2020; Muncie., 2002). Central to this approach is the role of teacher feedback, which helps students to improve their writing through several stages of composition. In order for teacher feedback to be effective, it should simultaneously address both cognitive and motivational factors (Brookhart, 2008). There are two major categories of feedback, namely form-focused feedback and content-focused feedback. Although a large body of research concerning the present issue has been done, the findings are still inconclusive (Chandler, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris., 2004; Fithriani, 2018; Truscott, 1996; Truscott., 1999). It is widely agreed that a combination of feedback on form and feedback on contents can help students improve their writing (Guenette, 2007; Irwin, 2017; Muncie, 2000; Muncie., 2002; Rodríguez & Mosquera, 2020; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). Besides, most of previous studies have focused on how to provide corrective feedback and how to combine it with feedback on contents. Hardly any research has touched upon what types of errors can be overcome by students themselves, and it is therefore unnecessary for the teacher to intervene. Prior studies have yet not looked into how content feedback

should be worded to inspire and instruct students to improve their subsequent drafts. This paper bridges the gap of research on the diagnosis of error types for corrective comments and effective content feedback that helps EFL students improve their writing performance. It also makes a contribution to the literature in a context where research on teacher feedback on EFL compositions is scarcely documented in international publications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to its complex nature, feedback on ESL/EFL student writing has been investigated from different angles. With regard to feedback on forms, a heated debate was raised by Truscott (1996) who claims that corrective feedback should be abandoned since it does more harm than good. This view, however, is challenged by many subsequent publications. Ferris and Roberts (2001) conducted a controlled experimental study focusing on analyzing coded (marked with what type of error) and un-coded feedback (the error was only underlined). Then they compared the results with that of a control group which did not receive any response from the teacher. Their findings show that both groups receiving error feedback significantly outperformed the “no feedback” counterpart. Nevertheless, the data did not show significant differences between the “coded” and “un-coded” categories. In a similar vein, Chandler (2004) carried out an experiment on two groups. In the first group, she underlined the errors but asked them not to correct them until the end of the semester. The second group also had their errors underlined, but they were asked to correct them prior to writing the next composition. She found that the first group could write faster in subsequent essays. They, however, committed the same mistakes. The second group had improvements both in accuracy and fluency. It can be, therefore, concluded that process writing helps improve composition fluency, and teacher’s un-coded feedback, to a certain extent, can help students improve accuracy.

Further, the issue of oral feedback combined with written feedback was examined by Young and Cameron (2005). They analyzed the results of an experiment which involved 53 post-intermediate immigrant learners, broken into three groups: (1) receiving direct, explicit written feedback and five-minute teacher-student conference, (2) receiving the same kind of feedback but without teacher-student conference, and (3) receiving no feedback. Three types of error (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article) were chosen for the analysis. They found that a combination of direct feedback and conferencing produced the most significant effects in improving their rewrites, and that feedback was worthwhile even when students did not receive individual conferencing. This study, however, did not touch on the effectiveness of different types of feedback, such as the distinction between direct and indirect feedback. Such a comparison was conducted by Sheen (2007) who examined the effects of two types of corrective feedback and the role of language analytic ability in mediating the feedback effect on the use of English articles by adult learners of various first language backgrounds. Her study revealed that focused written corrective feedback resulted in accuracy improvement, and that direct correction with metalinguistic comments was more effective than direct correction without metalinguistic comments. A similar study on corrective feedback was repeated in a different setting by Farjadnasab and Khodashenas (2017) who studied the influence of different types of written corrective feedback on EFL learners. The study found that that written corrective feedback helped students improve their writing accuracy and that direct comments were more effective than indirect feedback. Although such studies only dealt with a narrow area of grammar, the findings generally concur with one another insofar as feedback on form does result in improvement of accuracy, and direct corrective feedback is more effective than indirect responses.

Nevertheless, teacher’s mid-draft feedback as mentioned above is criticized by Muncie (2000) who claims that teacher’s mid-draft feedback hinders students’ creativeness since they tend to strictly follow what the teacher suggests. She argues that such feedback does not have long-term benefits. In order to avoid what she calls “overshadowing role of evaluator”, she recommends using peer mid-draft feedback so that the writer has total choice over which recommendations to use. To support her claim, she administered a questionnaire to 29 upper-intermediate students at a Japanese university so as to elicit students’ attitude to types of feedback. A five-scale

questionnaire ranging from 1 (not at all useful) to 5 (extremely useful) was employed to elicit their responses. It was revealed that the average rate was 4.03 for peer mid-draft feedback, and 90% reported amendments to their rewrites after receiving peer feedback. However, 65% reported that they did not utilize suggestions from their peers. This, according to her, implies that they had more freedom over using or not using their partner's comments while they would mostly follow the teacher's recommendations. Muncie's findings were also supported by recent studies (Fithriani, 2018; Gao, Schunn, & Yu, 2018; Kuyyogsuy, 2019) whose results indicate that peer feedback help students improve their writing performance in a number of aspects: it helps promote social interaction, develop affective strategies, support critical thinking skills, become more autonomous learners, and enhance social and intellectual development through working collaboratively. Irrespective of whether it is teacher or peer feedback, these studies lead us to a preliminary conclusion that corrective feedback is beneficial for improving student writing accuracy. The question is: what pattern is more effective- content feedback followed by form feedback or form feedback followed by content feedback?

In this regard, Fathman and Whalley (1990) investigated writing of 72 students who were required to draft a composition about a sequence of a story in 30 minutes. Four types of feedback were provided, including zero, content, form, and content and form. The feedback on form involved underlining all grammar errors, feedback on content was composed of general comments. The original writing and rewrites were graded by two independent raters based on the number of grammar errors in each essay. Their writing was also graded holistically for content based on four criteria: organization, description, coherence, and creativity. The results show that content and form feedback provided at the same time was as effective as when they were given separately. They argue that it might not be necessary to have multiple drafting since revision and editing can be done simultaneously. However, this suggestion, which discards multi-draft composition, seems to be ungrounded because they have not conducted any longitudinal research to test the claim. Beason (1993), who conducted research on the relationship between feedback and revision in writing across curriculum classes, found that students' rewrites mainly focused on formal accuracy although teacher feedback primarily concentrated on global areas, i.e., contents of writing.

In a different setting, Ashwell (2000) carried out a study with 50 Japanese students who were asked to write a 500-word composition with two drafts before the final version. Four different patterns of teacher feedback were given: (1) content-focused feedback on draft 1, then form-focused feedback on draft 2, (2) the reverse direction (3) both types given simultaneously, and (4) no feedback at all. The form feedback included circling or underlining grammatical, lexical and mechanical errors. The content feedback mainly focused on multiple sentence level issue, organization, cohesion and relevance. The compositions were assessed by English native-speaker scorers. He found that pattern 1, content feedback followed by form feedback, was not superior to the reverse pattern or the mixed pattern. In addition, content quality was not significantly influenced by feedback. His post-hoc analysis showed that students tended to heavily attend to form feedback and pay less attention to content. The most recent research on form feedback and content improvement was conducted by Rodríguez and Mosquera (2020), who use a strategy known as "explicit rhetorical instruction". In addition to providing corrective and content feedback, the teachers instructed about the characteristics of good essays and introduced exemplary writing samples. They found that a combination of both feedback and explicit rhetorical instruction would enhance EFL students' writing performance.

From the students' perspective, Seker and Dincer (2014) investigation into students' perceptions on teacher feedback in second language writing classes in a Turkish university found that students preferred receiving feedback on both content and form, as well as organizational aspects of writing. They also perceived that feedback on all aspects of writing was beneficial for their English language improvement with higher rates on grammar, content, vocabulary, and organization and with lower rates on punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. The researchers suggest that it is useful to identify students' needs and expectations when deciding what types of feedback to be prioritized.

In summary, the analysis of literature above indicates that there is no perfect formula for teacher's feedback on students' writing. Previous research results generally support a combination of direct and indirect comments along with occasional metalinguistic explanations to help students improve their accuracy. Content feedback should be provided on first drafts and corrective comments should be given on second or third drafts to avoid hindering students' creativity and fluency. The literature also reveals a gap of research on certain errors that can be handled by students themselves and the types of comments that help them improve their writing contents. The current research will shed more light on these issues.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and Settings

The research involved 36 first-year students (9 males and 27 females) who majored in English at a university in Vietnam. The participants' mother tongue is Vietnamese, which belongs to the isolated and non-inflected typology. All of them had never been abroad at the time of the research implementation. For the ethical reason, pseudonyms are used in this paper. Their admission to the program was based on the grades of English, Math, and Literature either from university entrance examinations or high school transcripts. Their English proficiency levels ranged from A-2 to B-1 on the CEFR scale (Common European Framework of Reference for Language). The English course entitled *Reading and Writing* was delivered in 15 weeks and the process writing approach was adopted during the course delivery.

3.2. Procedures and Data Collection Methods

The present study involved two phases: diagnosis and treatment. Given the fact that some studies produced some inconsistent findings in corrective feedback (eg: (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Muncie, 2000; Truscott, 1996)), it was hypothesized that there might be some kinds of errors that need not to be corrected for Vietnamese EFL learners since they could handle by themselves. Such errors could be soon overcome with little conscious effort during the course of learning. It was therefore unnecessary and time-consuming to give corrective feedback on such errors. By contrast, there might be some types of errors that students cannot fix by themselves. The results of the first phase aimed to answer the question "*What type (s) of errors do not require the teacher's intervention during the process of writing, and what types of errors students cannot fix by themselves?*". In this phase, the students did not receive any feedback from the teacher throughout the writing process. All the improvements were, therefore, made by the students' own efforts. Five types of errors were selected for investigation, namely *Subject-verb agreement, Nouns for generic references, Prepositions, Tense, and Articles*. It was noted that if a sentence contained a verb with misuse of both tense and subject-verb agreement, it was counted as two errors. A zero form used where one should exist was also considered an error.

In the second phase, content-focused feedback was given to see how the students improved their rewrites. The writing topic was entitled "*Write an essay in which you examine what you believe are most significant factors in personal development.*" First, students were provided with guidelines to help them focus on the topic and develop their ideas. For instance, family was exemplified as a factor that influences their values and belief, etc. Before students wrote their second drafts, they were shown the organization of an essay and asked to look at an example to see how a draft was rewritten and whether the second draft met the previously-mentioned criteria. Next, three anonymous paragraphs were given to the students to analyze. Thus, the students had received clear instructions before they started the revision. The comments were given on the margins and at the end, including five types, namely: *Directive/suggestive comments, questions for clarification, asking for details/examples, pointing out irrelevant parts, and challenging questions*. The extent of students' rewrite improvement was based on the positive changes of their first and second drafts with reference to the teacher's comments. In addition, five students were interviewed for more insights into how they interpreted the comments. If the contents in the rewrites had changed as expected, it was

considered “Significant”. If the change partially met the criteria, it was regarded as “Insignificant”. If the student hardly made any change as suggested, it was grouped in the “No improvement” category.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Phase 1

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of phase 1 research was to determine what types of errors need to be intervened by the teacher. The results of the first three-draft compositions were of significant pedagogical values. The most noticeable feature was that the students progressively wrote longer after each draft and some types of errors decreased while others increased. This indicates that the students could not correct certain types of errors without the teacher’s help as can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table-1. Statistics of errors without teacher’s intervention.

Types of errors	Average number of errors		
	First draft Average number of words: 319	Second draft Average number of words: 342	Final draft Average number of words: 534
1.Subject-verb agreement	15	9	3
2.Nouns for generic references	7	3	5
3.Prepositions	4	4	9
4.Tenses	24	35	44
5.Articles	6	4	10

As can be seen in Table 1, the first type of errors seemed to be gradually overcome by the students without the teacher’s assistance. The subject-verb agreement mistakes were reduced considerably in the second draft and almost disappeared in the final version. This indicates students’ developmental errors and such problems can be gradually overcome (Lightbown & Spada, 2011). Several mistakes found in the final version might be attributed to their neglect during proofreading. For example, a student initially wrote “*every country HAVE special culture*”, but later in the same draft she corrected “*Everybody always SMILES*” (my emphasis). The same is true for the second type of errors with most students being able to overcome them. It should be noted that this error was affected by the students’ mother tongue interference. As a non-inflected language, Vietnamese utilizes a particle “*các/những*” to indicate plurality before a noun. When the noun is used for generic references, it is not necessary to use a particle.

In a similar vein, the misuse of prepositions is also due to students’ mother tongue influence but it is much harder to overcome. There were hardly any improvements in the subsequent drafts since many prepositional errors were repeated in all the rewrites. The most common mistake of this type is the use of “*at*” before “*there*” as in the following example: *I met my teacher AT there*. Such errors are pervasively seen throughout the three drafts, showing that many students were not aware of the rule. They just literally transferred the word from Vietnamese into English, thinking that it was the correct usage.

With regards to tenses, the numbers of errors were in proportion to the number of words and sentences in each draft. However, there was evidence that a number of students mastered the rule. For instance, a student recounted his experience in which both the simple present and simple past tenses were employed as in the following excerpt: *Once time I went to supermarket, I met my teacher at there. She also bought some things. I saw her so I stand and take my hat, bow the head to greeting her*. The student knew that the past simple tense should be used in some cases. He used the correct irregular verbs for the first four verbs, but he did not do so for the last three. It is interesting to note that while he used the past forms of irregular verbs correctly, he just used the bare forms of the regular ones. No *-ed* verb was found in the three drafts though this verb form seemed to be quite easy to acquire. Similarly, articles were also a difficult area for Vietnamese students of English. Although the definite article “*the*” was correctly used in a number of sentences, the indefinite “*a/an*” was only occasionally seen in the students’ writing. Like the prepositional mistakes, many students just employed Vietnamese rules for writing English. This type of mistake can be seen in

sentences such as the following: *America is place focus many people*. This sentence was made as a result of word to word translation. As mentioned earlier, Vietnamese does not require an article or a particle before “*place*” as in the sentence above except when there is an emphasis on the singular number. The negative transfer of the non-inflected Vietnamese is also evident in the sentence.

In short, the analysis above proves that there are certain types of errors that can be self-corrected by low-intermediate students and there are other types that cannot be fixed without the teacher’s assistance. Whether the self-fixed category is universal, culture-specific or individualistic is not confirmed. In the present study, it appears that a majority of students were aware of the subject-verb agreement rule. The mistakes in the first drafts resulted from students’ lack of attention. When they concentrated on accuracy, such errors could be eliminated. In the second case of “Singular nouns without an article for generic references”, although the number of mistakes slightly increased in the third draft, it was in proportion to the number of sentences. It is evident that most students could overcome the problem. It therefore might be unnecessary to provide corrective feedback on these two error categories. Nevertheless, many students did not seem to master the other three areas of grammar. Hence, it was hard for them to improve accuracy in these aspects without the teacher’s assistance.

4.2. Phase 2

The objective of this phase of research was to find out how feedback on content helped students to improve their writing with reference to the wording of comments. The content-focused feedback yielded the following results (Table 2).

Table-2. Statistics of content-focused feedback results.

Types of teacher comments	Change in rewrites		
	Significant	Insignificant	No improvement
<i>Marginal comments</i> (Total: 156)			
• Directive/suggestive comments	41	9	3
• Questions for clarification	36	7	1
• Asking for details/examples	20	5	
• Pointing out irrelevant parts	22		
• Challenging questions	11	1	
<i>End comments</i> (Total: 36)	22	14	

As can be seen in Table 2, different types of comments resulted in different effects on students’ rewrites. It is noticeable that directive and suggestive comments were the most common. There were two major problems to which I gave two types of directive comments: Students either included more than one point in a paragraph, or provided many details without a clear thesis, which might confuse the reader. For that reason, the directives such as the following were seen in many drafts: “*You have 2 points in this paragraph..... Each point should be developed separately*”, or “*Focus this paragraph on one point. What specific influence do you want to prove...?*” (My emphasis) However, some students did not know how to improve their drafts when receiving such comments. For instance, when I looked at Hoa’s second draft, I hardly saw any improvement in her rewrite although I had highlighted the areas that needed to be revised. The comment reads “*Focus on one point that you want to prove about the influence of family. Explain and develop your example further to prove that point*” (My emphasis). My interview with her revealed that she was confused with this comment. She did not interpret what the comment meant, whether it was to narrow down to one aspect of family influence such as influence on personality, belief, etc. or it was influence in general. It is worth noting that the cases of “insignificant” and “no improvement” were attributed to such comments. By contrast, all students who received specific directive comments made a significant improvement in their subsequent drafts. For example, when revising his first draft with a comment which read “*Can you let your reader know what type*

of influence you plan to prove? personality? values? positive? negative?” Hung just focused on negative influence of family and friends on personality development rather than influence in general.

The second most common response type was clarification questions, among which an average of three comments in each essay helped students improve their rewrites substantially. The most usual question for clarification was one that asked students about what point they were trying to make. For instance, when a student began a paragraph with an example, and then she continued to give more details without any focus, I responded with *“What point are you trying to prove with this example?”* When revising the draft, she added a topic sentence overarching the paragraph *“Society is an important factor that plays a key role in developing our personal values and how we see ourselves as individuals”*. Nevertheless, some students seemed to struggle with this comment type. They could not reorganize their ideas to make their point clear to readers though the teacher had located the area. For example, Hue did not know how to revise the paragraph with this comment: *“I’m not sure what your point is here. Clarify the influence your friend had on your values. Be explicit! Connect the example to a point.”* (My emphasis) Although I showed her a quite clear direction, she could not distinguish the difference between a point and a detail. It should be noted that this was a “special” student as she had to repeat this course. I decided to talk to her and pinpoint the problem. When meeting with her, I pointed at the paragraph, which was full of details but lacked a thesis. When asked what aspect of influence she wanted to discuss, her answer was to talk about how her friend influenced her personality and study. In fact, she mixed these ideas together and discussed them pervasively. I pointed to a heap of books on the table and made an analogy: *“Organizing ideas in an essay is similar to arranging these books on a bookshelf. Grammar books should be in one section and writing books in another. There should be a heading for each section so that it is easy for us to recognize”*. Upon hearing this she said it became very clear to her. In the next class I looked at her final draft and I saw that she made a good improvement and her ideas were better organized.

Another type of response found in the drafts was asking for details and examples. Since this feedback was quite straightforward, most of the students did well on their following drafts. Noticeably, the more specific the comments, the easier it seemed to be for the students to improve their rewrites, hence better revision. The following excerpts illustrate two different ways of asking for details: *“Can you give a specific incident and/or specific details, illustrating how her family support assisted her, and how it influenced her developing personality traits or values?”* and *“Give details and analysis to illustrate and prove your point”*. In responding to the first comment, the writer did provide a specific example to illustrate his point. In the second, however, he removed the part. He seemed to have difficulty finding support for the argument since the feedback was more general, and hence he could not develop it further.

Compared to the above categories, comments that point out irrelevant parts and challenges some argument or detail was less frequent. All the irrelevant or unrelated parts I had pointed out in the essays were removed in the revised drafts. In a similar vein, when I did not agree with a student on some point, I provided a challenging comment, and the student also erased that segment in the rewrite. For example, Lam wrote that *“Vietnamese traditional culture holds the human nature is originally kind and friendly. I live in Vietnam for 20 years, I cultivated treating friends friendly.”* I gave a challenging comment which reads: *“Are you saying that all Vietnamese people are kind and friendly? Life is more complicated than that, isn’t it?”* These sentences were removed in his second draft.

In addition to marginal notes, end comments served as a summary of feedback and evaluation to encourage the writer and remind him or her of the focus. In the present study, I found that changes made in the second draft were mostly based on the localized feedback provided earlier. Of the end comments grouped in the “insignificant” category, some cases did not result in considerable changes because the first drafts had already been well written, and the other comments did not help the students much due to their inability to develop their ideas. It is important to note that students might sometimes misinterpret end comments. For example, Trang received an end comment which read: *“I like your image of a baby as a sheet of white paper. I can see that you have put thought into this draft. I want you to work on analyzing your points and examples more deeply.”* Excited with the encouragement, she developed the idea of *“a baby as a sheet of white paper”* with six more sentences in a confusing way.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of form-focused feedback shows that it is not necessary for teachers to respond to all of students' errors as some of them can be overcome during the course of study. The teacher's job is to pinpoint their students' problems by administering diagnostic writing tests and/or examining students' drafts so as to decide what types of errors to intervene and which ones should be ignored. The teacher should keep a record of each student's typical errors to see whether there are improvements in their subsequent drafts, and what types of errors seem to be systematic, i.e. occurring repeatedly in many drafts. Then, the teacher's intervention should focus on the most typical and systematic errors. The findings of the content feedback indicate that some types of comments are more effective than others. In the class where I conducted the research, I prepared my students very carefully before and during the composing process. I gave them samples of a good paragraph and essay, helped them distinguish the difference between a point or thesis and a detail or example, how to develop an idea, etc. These steps are good preparation for students to interpret my feedback and utilize my comments to revise their composition. Despite such scaffolding, weaker students still struggled with how to treat comments for revision. I believe that it would be hard for them to improve their writing without the teacher's intervention. As the findings reveal, students sometimes had trouble with general directives, and therefore they did not know how to improve their rewrites. In my opinion, individualizing comments is a good way to tackle the issue. Since the teacher normally knows each student's ability, he or she might respond to their drafts in different ways: more questions and suggestions for better students, and more specific comments for the weaker.

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