

# Written corrective feedback in teaching writing: a review of theory, research and practice

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## Abstract

Linguistic errors are ubiquitous in the writing products of second and foreign language students. Errors in writing, therefore, have been a major concern to teachers or students in both English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Accordingly, error correction has been a central topic in second language (L2) teaching, especially writing. As such, written corrective feedback (WCF) has been an inviting topic of attraction for both L2 writing researchers and practitioners. Through a narrative review, this paper attempts to shed light on current and relevant theories of WCF, summarize several existing studies about WCF, and propose its practical application in teaching writing, especially in L2 higher education context.

*Keywords: written corrective feedback, teaching writing, higher education context, theoretical review*

## Introduction

Errors are inevitable parts in the process of learning a language. They may appear in the learning process of all language skills, including writing. Due that writing represents students' linguistic competence; errors should be somehow treated in order to advance their writing performance. Consequently, the presence of error treatment given by writing teachers is of importance. The written error treatment in writing is well-known as written corrective feedback. Written corrective feedback is considered as an essential part in the process of language learning and is one of the main elements in an instructional design. Purnawarman (2011) states that the vital role of written corrective feedback in students' learning process is evident in language learning and language instruction, including writing in English as Second or Foreign Language context.

Student writers maximize their potential by having sufficient writing practices and revisions. In the process of producing writing, from the initial stage until the final draft, they mostly rely on the existence of written corrective feedback for improving their writing, either from a lecturer or peer. Purnawarman (2011:1) further explains "feedback that students receive from a source, or a combination of sources, provides them with information about what is good and what needs to be improved so that they

can incorporate and use the feedback in their revisions and in the final product of their writing.”

Considering the significant role of written corrective feedback in the teaching and learning writing, the paper aims to discuss the relevant theories of written corrective feedback, summarize the studies on written corrective feedback that have been conducted, and propose the practical implementation in the process of teaching writing.

### Strategies for providing written corrective feedback

Written corrective feedback may take different forms of lecturer response to the errors which occur in students’ writing. Ellis (2009) summarizes that lecturer responses to students’ errors can be categorized based on the six basic strategies for providing written corrective feedback. They are direct written corrective feedback, indirect written corrective feedback, metalinguistic written corrective feedback, focused versus unfocused written corrective feedback or selected versus comprehensive written corrective feedback, electronic feedback, and reformulation.

#### 1. Direct Written Corrective Feedback

In this type of feedback, the lecturer provides the students with the correct form of the target language by crossing out an unnecessary phrase, word, or morpheme; inserting a missing word or morpheme; and writing the correct form above or near the erroneous form. The following is the example of direct feedback.

##### Example 1

a	a	the
A dog stole <del>bone</del> from <del>butcher</del> . He escaped with having <del>bone</del> . When the dog was		
over	a	a
going <del>through</del> <del>bridge</del> over <del>the</del> river he <del>found</del> dog in the river.		

An advantage of direct written corrective feedback is that it can provide the students with explicit guidance about how to correct their errors, especially if they do not know what the correct form is. Ferris and Roberts (2001, in Ellis, 2009) suggest that direct corrective feedback is probably better than indirect corrective feedback for student writers of low levels of proficiency. Its disadvantage is that it requires minimal processing on the part of the learner, so it may not contribute to long-term learning. However, a study conducted by Sheen (2007, in Ellis, 2009) suggests that direct corrective feedback can be effective in promoting acquisition of specific grammatical features.

#### 2. Indirect Written Corrective Feedback

This strategy allows lecturers to give indications that students have made an error without providing the correct form. There are two ways of giving indirect written corrective feedback. The first is indicating and locating the error. It takes the form of underlining and use of cursors to show omissions in the students’ written work

(as in the example below). The second is indication only. This way of indirect corrective feedback takes the form of an indication in the margin that an error has taken place in a line of text.

#### Example 2

A dog stole X bone from X butcher. He escaped with XhavingX X bone.  
 When the dog was going XthroughX X bridge over XtheX river he found X  
 dog in the river.

X = missing word      X\_\_X = wrong word

Indirect feedback is often preferred to direct one since it leads to ‘guided learning and problem solving’ and encourages students to reflect about linguistic forms. It is considered more likely to promote long-term learning. However, the results of studies investigating this claim are very mixed.

### 3. Metalinguistic Written Corrective Feedback

Metalinguistic written corrective feedback means that the lecturer provides learners with some form of explicit comment or metalinguistic clue about the nature of the errors they have made. There are two types of this strategy: use of error codes and brief grammatical descriptions. In the first type, lecturer writes codes in the form of abbreviated labels for different kinds of errors in the margins (e.g. ww = wrong word, art = article). There are two examples for the first type provided below.

#### Example 3

	art.	art.		WW art.
A dog	stole	bone	from	butcher. He escaped with
				having
				bone. When the
	prep.	art.	art.	art.
dog was	going	through	bridge	over the river he found
				dog in the river.

#### Example 4

Art. x 3; WW	A dog stole bone from butcher. He escaped with having bone.
Prep.; art.	When the dog was going through bridge over the river he
Art.	found dog in the river.

In the second type, lecturer provides students with metalinguistic explanations of their errors by numbering errors in text and writing a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the text.

## Example 5

(1)	(2)	(3)
A dog stole bone from butcher. He escaped with having bone. When the dog		
(4)	(5)	(6)
was going through bridge over the river he found dog in the river.		
<p>(1), (2), (5), and (6) — you need ‘a’ before the noun when a person or thing is mentioned for the first time.</p> <p>(3) — you need ‘the’ before the noun when the person or thing has been mentioned previously.</p> <p>(4) — you need ‘over’ when you go across the surface of something; you use ‘through’ when you go inside something (e.g. ‘go through forest’).</p>		

### 4. Selected versus Comprehensive Corrective Feedback

Lecturers can choose whether to correct all of the students’ errors, in which case is comprehensive corrective feedback, or to select specific error types for correction, selected corrective feedback. Selected corrective feedback may be especially helpful as it promotes not just attention but also understanding of the nature of the error. Meanwhile, comprehensive corrective feedback has the advantage of addressing a range of errors, so it might not be as effective as in assisting learners to acquire specific features as focused corrective feedback in the short term, it may prove superior in the long run.

### 5. Electronic Feedback

Extensive corpora of written English (either carefully constructed or simply available via search engine) can be exploited to provide students with assistance in their writing. This kind of assistance can be accessed by means of software programs while students write or can be utilized as a form of feedback.

### 6. Reformulation

This strategy consists of a native speaker’s reworking of the students’ entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact. Sachs and Polio (2007, in Ellis, 2009) report a study comparing reformulation with direct corrective feedback. The main difference between these two options was ‘a matter of presentation and task demands and was not related to the kinds of errors that were corrected’.

## Example 6

Original version:	As he was jogging, his tammy was shaken.
Reformulation:	As he was jogging, his tummy was shaking. tummy shaking
Error correction:	As he was jogging, his tammy was shaken.

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## Studies on Written Corrective Feedback

Due to the strong belief that feedback is important in the practice of teaching writing, a large number of studies have been conducted. Some researchers have focused their studies on written corrective feedback in writing, investigating its effectiveness and whether or not students benefit from it. Van Beuningen (2010:2) states “the numerous studies investigating the usefulness of corrective feedback are situated at the intersections of two academic disciplines: the field of second language (L2) writing and the domain of second language acquisition (SLA), both with their own theoretical and methodological orientations”. In line with the growth of studies about written corrective feedback, some controversies exist. Ellis (2009:4) points out “the controversy concerning corrective feedback centres on a number of issues: (1) whether corrective feedback contributes to L2 acquisition, (2) which errors to correct, (3) who should do the correcting (the lecturer or the learner him/herself), (4) which type of corrective feedback is the most effective, and (5) what is the best timing for corrective feedback (immediate or delayed).”

In the field of L2 writing, researchers have focused their research on investigating whether corrective feedback helps students in writing and how corrective feedback can help students to become more able and self-employed writers. They conducted their research by exploring the role of feedback in the process of developing learners’ editing and revision skills (e.g. in van Beuningen, 2010). Van Beuningen further explains that the focus of the research about corrective feedback experiences shifting towards the potential of written corrective feedback in aiding learners’ interlanguage development. Recent studies have been investigating if receiving and processing written corrective feedback can lead to L2 learning (e.g. in van Beuningen, 2010).

Research on written corrective feedback in L2 writing expands in scope and quality, and the literature on the use of it in L2 writing is extensive. Unfortunately, practitioner perspectives have been fundamentally excluded in the published literature. There have only been few researchers who have explored it from the perspective of the lecturers themselves - who make pedagogical decisions about the use of written corrective feedback in the classroom.

In order to investigate English language teaching, Golombek (1998, in Suwaed, 2011:12) suggests starting from what lecturers know and what kinds of knowledge they need. Yet, Desforges (1995, in Suwaed, 2011:12) argues that merely knowing what lecturers know is not enough. It is important to understand how lecturers use their knowledge when they teach. It is due to the fact that lecturers are “active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and

beliefs” (Borg, 2003:81). Thus, lecturers’ thinking systems play a major role in their approaches to, and innovation in, everyday teaching (Suwannasom, 2010:17). Borg (2003:81), then, proposes a concept known as ‘lecturer cognition’ to refer to ‘the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching - what lecturers know, believe, and think and how this affects their behaviour’.

Lecturer cognition functions as a frame that shapes teaching practice. Macalister (2010) suggests one model of the dynamic nature of lecturer cognition and shows that there are a number of factors which shape lecturer cognition itself. Among the factors, there is a term BAK, which represents beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge. This notion is proposed by Woods (1996, in Macalister, 2010). Freeman (2002) states that lecturer cognition plays an important role in their teaching practice since it influences their decisions. Li (2010), in her study, claims “lecturer cognition is composed of belief system and practice system, both of which are historically co-constructed within relevant discourse communities and communities of practices. Therefore, lecturer cognition should be studied at both individual level and social level.” Lecturer cognition encompasses a broad spectrum of notions, including the knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that lecturers have in relation to their actual teaching practices in a local or specific target context (Baker, 2014).

Thus there has been a rapid growth of interest in investigating language lecturer cognition and the teaching practice in recent years. Borg (2009:4) states “there is no doubt then that the study of language lecturer cognition is now an established field of inquiry.” He further explains that the most researched area has been second language (L2) grammar teaching, while writing has also been the focus although the volume has been smaller (Borg, 2009).

Among the studies of language lecturer cognition in teaching writing, some have focused on exploring written corrective feedback. Paiva (2011) conducted a study in the form of a mixed-method cross-sectional survey research about Brazilian English as Foreign Language lecturers’ beliefs about grammar-based feedback on L2 writing. The findings show that the community of lecturers being observed in the study agrees with four beliefs about corrective grammar in writing classes. The four beliefs are: grammar correction in L2 writing is necessary in writing classes; providing corrective feedback on learners’ writing is time-consuming but worthwhile; grammar feedback in L2 writing does not necessarily help learners write well, but can help them write accurately; grammar feedback in L2 writing is useful because students expect it from lecturers.

Lee (2008) conducted a study entitled Understanding lecturers’ written feedback practices in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. She examined the written feedback provided by 26 Hong Kong secondary English lecturers to 174 student texts and interviewed 6 of the lecturers to find out the factors which have influenced their responding practices. The findings of Lee’s study show that lecturers’ written feedback occurred in single-draft classrooms and was primarily error-focused; contravening the principles recommended in local curriculum documents. The interview data highlight four important issues that shed light on lecturers’ feedback practices: accountability, lecturers’ beliefs and values, exam culture, and (lack of) lecturer training. She then

concluded that lecturers' feedback practices are influenced by a myriad of contextual factors including lecturers' beliefs, values, understandings, and knowledge, which are mediated by the cultural and institutional contexts, such as philosophies about feedback and attitude to exams, and socio-political issues pertaining to power and lecturer autonomy.

Alshahrani and Storch (2014) investigated lecturers' written corrective feedback practices in a Saudi EFL context in terms of the extent of the feedback, type and focus of the feedback, and how these practices align with the institutional guidelines, the lecturers' expressed beliefs, as well as their students' preferences. The study found that the lecturers believed that written corrective feedback is important for improving their students' writing and preventing error fossilization. Therefore, they provided comprehensive feedback. It also revealed that the lecturers' feedback practice did not align with their beliefs.

Hartshorn, Evans, and Tuioti (2014) conducted another survey analyzing learners, lecturer, and situational variables that may influence lecturers' corrective feedback choices in second language writing. They also examined the practitioners who provide the most and least feedback targeting linguistic accuracy. They state that the most obvious pattern observed in the research is that written corrective feedback is indeed used extensively in L2 writing by extremely experienced lecturers. The average year of ESL/EFL teaching experience was slightly more than 16 years. Thus they conclude that the participants of the survey who provided written corrective feedback comprise a highly educated and experienced group of lecturers.

Indrastana (2016) carried on a qualitative study on written corrective feedback cognition and practice of an exemplary FL writing lecturer. The result of the study showed that the exemplary EFL writing lecturer implemented written corrective feedback in the last stage of draft writing with focus on students' accuracy in writing. Content and organization were discussed in the previous drafting stages, and the lecturer employed oral feedback. Furthermore, he provided four types of written corrective feedback on students' writing, i.e. direct feedback, indirect feedback, metalinguistic feedback, and reformulation feedback. His practice of providing written corrective feedback on students' writing covered three focuses: grammar, language expression, and mechanics. The main focus of the written corrective feedback provided by the lecturer was grammar in order to strengthen the students' language accuracy in writing. Besides, the lecturer cognition greatly influenced the implementation of written corrective feedback. The main beliefs the lecturer holds are beliefs about the importance of written corrective feedback, beliefs about the effectiveness of each type of written corrective feedback for treating certain kinds of errors, and beliefs about the students. Those main beliefs, as well as the lecturer's teaching experience, become the basis of the implementation of written corrective feedback in teaching practice.

## **Conclusion**

Apart from the pros and cons of the effectiveness of written corrective feedback in second language learning, especially writing, and which type of written corrective

feedback is more effective to students' improvement, there is an alternative viewpoint dealing with the existence of written corrective feedback in teaching L2 writing, which is from its practitioners' perspectives. Studies can be directed to further explore writing teachers or writing lecturers cognition about written corrective feedback, as well as students' response dealing with it.

By taking the great role of written corrective feedback in L2 learning into account, it is suggested that EFL writing lecturers also take written corrective feedback into account when dealing with students' writing draft. It is not the way of assessing students' writing, but it is more on helping students develop their language accuracy in writing.

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