



## A suggested model of corrective feedback provision



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Combining error correction with error feedback.
- Targeting one linguistic structure at a time.
- Providing error correction on all the functional uses of the targeted structure.

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### ABSTRACT

Following Guénette (2007), Bitchener (2008), Bitchener & Knoch (2009), among others, I believe that previous studies on corrective feedback provision were flawed in terms of their “design, execution, and analysis” (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009: 204). As a commentary on previous research findings, the current paper aims to suggest a corrective feedback provision model on how future studies should be designed, so that comparisons can be safely made. The suggested model underlies three basic premises. These are: (1) *combining error correction with error feedback*; (2) *targeting one linguistic structure at a time*; and (3) *providing error correction on all the functional uses of the targeted structure*. This approach has made it imperative that corrective feedback be factored out into error correction vis-à-vis error feedback. Whereas error correction targets sentence-level language corrections for local and mechanical errors such as improving grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, error feedback targets global issues that affect meaning and organization. Additionally, I suggest drawing a line of demarcation between two types of focused feedback: providing focused feedback selectively versus providing focused feedback comprehensively. The suggested model then calls for adopting relatively an all-inclusive approach to feedback provision, a model that, I believe, might be helpful in theory-building, and thus in bridging the gap between the theory of corrective feedback provision and actual classroom practices in some FL contexts. © 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

### 1. Introduction

Providing corrective feedback on students' writing products is surely a painstaking task for both teachers and learners in FL contexts. Part of the problem lies in finding the optimal pedagogy of error feedback in the writing classroom. Writing researchers, whose goal has always been to lend writing teachers a helping hand to make informed decisions about error treatment in writing classes, have available to them a wide range of error feedback techniques to experiment with. Writing teachers always aspire to find out the most practical and most effective classroom practice which would ultimately help their student writers locate, correct, and edit their compositions on their own. Their choice of the feedback

option in FL writing classes is often constrained by the adverse realities of the learning environment [103]. They therefore choose the error feedback techniques which they think would work best for them on their own accord [6]. This is probably so because current research on error treatment has not as yet made clear-cut answers as to (1) whether to provide error corrections on students' writing products or not, and (2) if yes, how to correct L2 students' compositions.

As for the first inquiry, current debate on the efficacy of corrective feedback on improving the linguistic accuracy of EFL student writers has crystallized into two competing lines of thought. For one, corrective feedback is ineffective, and could possibly be harmful [88,149,119,150,56,153]. To the advocates of this line of thinking, the slight gains of grammatical accuracy reported in some investigations on corrective feedback could be attributed in part (or possibly on whole) to some external forces such as research

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design, classroom instruction, etc. (for an illuminating discussion, see Refs. [149,153,77]. For the other (e.g. Refs. [62,60,3,25,26,100,15,134,19,16,51,52], corrective feedback is indispensable on some theoretical and practical grounds. At the theoretical plane, numerous studies have shown that corrective feedback does have significant positive effects on learners' abilities to write accurately. Research (e.g. Refs. [34,102,81,59,61,63,60,98,100]; has also shown that students value teacher's feedback for error correction in improving their writing. At the practical plane, although some writing teachers "tend to treat error feedback as a job with little long-term significance" [99]:216), they still view error correction as an indispensable pedagogic strategy. What this basically means is that they cannot make do without providing corrective feedback on their student writers' written assignments [19,75]. It would be unpractical for many of them to give up the practice of providing corrective feedback on their students' writing merely on the grounds that this "would fit in better with some theorists' preferred approaches to teaching" [24]: 124).

As for the second inquiry (i.e. how feedback should be administered in an FL context), current research (e.g. Refs. [95,131,149,62,60,139,138,15,16,11,12,13,14,7], has centered the debate on two nontrivial concerns. These are (1) which errors should be corrected in a student's writing product, and (2) how to provide corrections for each error type. In addition to the external variables (e.g. the adverse realities of the L2 context) which would affect the interpretations of research findings on corrective feedback, internal variables, namely direct versus indirect feedback and focused versus unfocused feedback, are also crucial in interpreting these findings. As a commentary on the findings of previous research on the efficacy of corrective feedback provision, I will try to show how these two internal variables could have biased the findings and, therefore, the interpretations.

This paper is organized as follows. In section (2) below, the two main issues that, I believe, have shaped research on which errors should be targeted are highlighted. Concisely, in 2.1 I interject on the debate whether students in FL contexts should learn to write or write to learn, and in 2.2 I will try to show how the direct/indirect approach to feedback provision has also influenced research on which errors should be targeted by the writing teacher. In Section 3, I move to the other part of the story: how many errors should be targeted at one time. I will try to show that disagreement on how the feedback should be focused has biased the interpretations of the findings of research on the efficacy of feedback provision. In Section 4, I will suggest a relatively new model of feedback provision in FL contexts. In the conclusion section in 5, I will try to relate this to the theoretical constructs that may motivate the suggested model.

## 2. Which errors should be targeted?

One major concern for the writing teaching in FL contexts is this one: Which errors should be targeted on the student writer's compositions? Research to date has drawn a line of demarcation between providing feedback on sentence-level language corrections for local and mechanical errors such as improving grammar, spelling, and vocabulary on the one hand and providing feedback on global issues that affect meaning and organization, on the other. Until now, there is no conclusive evidence on whether the feedback should be form-focused or content-based. The more practical, traditional writing-to-learn approach [109] which is common in L2 contexts (see Ref. [165]; on China [126]; on Poland) focuses on 'lower order concerns' [17]: 24), so that the final product would be error free. The more 'ideal' learning-to-write approach [81,82,83,21], which has won the battle in L1 contexts and is now

gaining more ground in some L2 contexts (see Ref. [166] on China [30]; on Turkey; and [127] on Germany), focuses on 'higher-order concerns' by adopting a more lenient approach towards sentence-level errors as a trade-off with content improvement. Advocates of both approach are still disputing whether students should write to learn or learn to write.

### 2.1. Writing-to-learn or learning-to-write?

Advocates of the traditional form-focused approach contend that classroom writing practices and corrective feedback drills should target the language-related problems that L2 learners have. By focusing on form, the general conviction is that students can apply the linguistic (and probably discourse) knowledge they have acquired in class in their L2 writing. This basically amounts to saying that high L2 proficiency could positively impact the writing ability [116]. One way to achieve this, according to [91]; for example, is to communicate sufficient amounts of meta-knowledge to L2 learners. Accordingly, most classroom writing activities for practicing teachers who adopt this line of reasoning have been either controlled or guided where sentence-level structures are usually targeted.

This is probably sanctioned in L2 contexts because, according to Chenoweth & Hayes [28] and Roca de Larios et al. [132]; composing in a second or a foreign language is definitely more time, and effort-consuming than composing in one's native language. When composing in a foreign language, a writer transforms the propositional content of the message into language which is not always available at his disposable. Research has shown that L2 learners revert to the strategies they have developed in their L1 writing to overcome the language problems they experience when trying to express their intentions in L2 (see Refs. [38,135,93,92]. The inevitable outcome is always an intention-expression mismatch. Simply put, L2 learners with low proficiency in L2 may fall back on their L1 at the lexical and sentential levels [97,158]; also see Ref. [39] for discussion on the 'thinking episodes' appearing in the writing of L2 learners). Advocates of this approach have argued that L2 writers need language-specific instruction such as improving grammar, spelling, and vocabulary ahead of receiving instructions on higher-order thinking skills like generating ideas, organizing and developing their 'train of thoughts' (see Ref. [147].

The critique against this line of reasoning has brought up a number of concerns including:

- L2 writers with limited command of L2 linguistic knowledge find themselves fully absorbed in struggling with sentence-level grammatical problems (see Refs. [17,41]).
- L2 writers with limited command of L2 linguistic knowledge find it difficult to identify and correct errors even when they have been marked for them (see Ref. [58].
- Irrespective of how much formal instruction on language-related issues learners receive, the writing generated tends to be simple in content (see Refs. [170,171]).
- Teaching writing in a 'reductionist and mechanistic model', to use Zamel's [170]: abstract) words, has deprived the student writers from the richness of 'the naturalistic settings in which it takes place' Zamel [171]: abstract).
- Teaching writing in a 'reductionist and mechanistic model' undermines the claims made in contrastive rhetoric that languages usually vary their rhetorical choices in textual organization [87].
- Promoting linguistic knowledge in this manner could potentially harm simultaneous intellectual growth (see Ref. [123].
- As the learning setting tends to be basically teacher-directed, the teacher's feedback becomes carefully planned beforehand, authoritarian, and form-oriented depending on varying

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