

## ***Indirect Feedback: A Plausible Suggestion for Overcoming Error Occurrence in L2 Writing***

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Despite the significant emphasis that process-oriented research has laid on content as compared to mechanical aspects of L2 writing (Raimes, 1983; Spack & Sadow, 1983; Taylor, 1981), many written products are difficult to understand owing to their grammatical inaccuracies (Ferris, 2002). There has been an ongoing controversy in the literature regarding the plausibility of error correction, in general and the extent to which direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback could affect overcoming grammatical inaccuracies in L2 writing, in particular (Ferris, 1999a; Truscott, 1996, 1999). Hence, the present study was an attempt at finding out whether indirect feedback on certain error categories as compared to direct feedback on every single error could have any significant effect on improving the students' L2 writing ability. Therefore, 44 Ph.D. students of an advanced Academic English writing course were randomly selected from 90 homogeneous students among a total population of 118 students majoring in different engineering fields. Having randomly divided the subjects into two groups of 22 students, the researcher further assigned 8 essays to be written on suggested subjects during one semester. One group was provided with indirect feedback on certain error categories and required to further self-edit the errors marked by the teacher and also provide a revised draft of their texts. The other group was exposed to direct feedback in terms of detailed comments on every single error they had made. Both groups were also required to correct the error categories they could possibly discern in 50 erroneous sentences containing 159 errors from 9 error categories. The results revealed that there was a significant difference regarding the error categories properly identified and corrected by the

indirect feedback group. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the writing ability of the indirect feedback group as compared to that of the direct feedback group.

**Key words: error category, error correction, direct error corrective feedback, indirect error corrective feedback**

## **ERROR CORRECTION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

According to Robb et al. (1984), there is no unanimous agreement regarding the best way that L2 writing teachers can react to their students' writing errors, on the one hand or the stage in the composing process at which such feedback can have a more beneficial effect, on the other. Viewpoints regarding the extent to which error correction can be beneficial to L2 writers have always been varying at two extremes of a continuum. While at one extreme some L2 writing teachers tend to merely focus on hunting errors, at another extreme some anti-grammar teachers tend to ignore mechanical errors as an insignificant, low-level "surface" feature. In fact, such scholars believe that L2 students will eventually overcome or outgrow such mechanical errors provided that they are given the chance of being further exposed to reading and writing in L2 (Noguchi, 1991).

In the early 1970s, structuralism and then audiolingualism were the approaches to language learning/instruction and, in fact, ESL/EFL writing instruction was mainly concerned with grammar and error correction (Ferris, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Raimes, 1991; Silva, 1990). Later on, communicative language teaching (CLT) which laid emphasis on communicative competence overtook grammar-centered instruction (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1988). Afterwards, a perfect match to communicative language teaching, namely the process approach to L2 writing instruction was introduced by Zamel (1976). In fact, process writing laid emphasis on the way the writers generated ideas or meaning and also delayed paying attention to "form" until the final "editing" stage. However, as stated by Applebee (1981), various classroom reports revealed that 80% of L2 teachers were still

more focused on responding to mechanical (or language-specific) errors as the most important criterion for responding to L2 writing (Collins, 1981; Moran, 1981; Murray, 1982; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985). Moreover, supporters of a strong version of CLT including Truscott (1996) recommended that grammar correction in L2 writing classes had to be banned since they believed it could have a negative effect on students' attitudes toward L2 learning. In addition, in their Natural Approach, Krashen and Terrell had also regarded error correction as a factor increasing learners' affective filters or anxiety levels (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Terrell, 1977).

Contrary to the abovementioned views, Hendrickson (1978) considered errors as signals of students' success or progress in language learning. Therefore, he suggested that the ways through which errors could be made more salient for the learners were very important in terms of improving their L2 writing proficiency. In other words, he believed that paying selective attention to L2 writing errors was likely to lead L2 writers to the correction of those errors at a later time. As a result, he suggested the need to provide L2 writing students with systematic analyses of their L2 writing errors.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Ever since Corder (1974) laid emphasis on the importance of considering errors in the language learning process, ESL researchers and teachers have been discussing issues such as the reasons why language learning errors occur; the significance of errors in the process of learning, and the path as well as the plausibility of any teacher-oriented reaction shown in response to the writing errors made by L2 learners (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). In fact, a distinction has been made in the literature between direct and indirect teacher feedback (Hendrickson, 1978, 1980; Lalande, 1982). The direct feedback refers to the correct form being provided by the teacher for the student writer and requires the students to transcribe the correction into the revised version of the text. On the contrary, the indirect feedback refers to an indication on

the part of the teacher that there is an error without providing the correct form for the students. It actually expects the students to rely on their own in revising or self-editing the text and making the required correction.

Error correction researchers have reported that indirect feedback as compared to direct feedback is more beneficial in helping students to make progress in accuracy over time (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Helt, 2000) as well as improving their ability to edit their own composition (Bitchener, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995b; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997). In a study of university-level Spanish language students, it was found that the students were able to edit 93% of errors marked in various linguistic categories during a 10-minute in-class editing session (Frantzen & Rissell, 1987). In addition, based on the findings of a longitudinal design, it was revealed that verbal feedback in the form of brief explanations on error patterns together with in-text underlining of examples of these error types could lead to successful revisions in 73% of the cases (Ferris, 1997). Other studies also revealed that about 80% of the errors marked by their teachers could be successfully edited by the students (Chaney, 1999; Ferris et al., 2000; Komura, 1999).

As further stated by Ferris (2002), while engaging students in a problem solving process, indirect feedback tends to provide them with a greater cognitive engagement and reflection on linguistic forms which, in turn, may promote language acquisition. In fact, the notion underlying this assumption is that by actively engaging learners, indirect feedback would encourage them to look more critically at their own L2 performance and “notice” their language problems. Moreover, according to Swain (1998), “noticing” is a conscious act of attention to language form in one’s own output which serves to raise the awareness of “holes” in the interlanguage. In other words, it may lead learners to become more aware of their own linguistic problems.

According to Ferris (2003), it seems that several decades of ongoing research activity in this area is still too imperfect and contradictory due to a lack of long-term studies benefiting from adequate regulations in terms of control groups, data collection methods, analysis procedures, the research

settings, procedural methods of providing teacher-corrective feedback, and instructional procedures applied by the teachers (as cited in McNeill & Turnau, 2008). In other words, Ferris argues that the existing inconsistencies in conducting longitudinal research on L2 writing may have led to wrong claims regarding the nature of L2 writing or the effect of corrective feedback provided by L2 writing teachers. One such claim seems to be the belief that teacher-provided corrective feedback on students' writing actually has a delaying effect on the improvement of L2 writing (as cited in McNeill & Turnau, 2008).

Contrary to the aforementioned research studies emphasizing the advantages of indirect error corrective response to L2 writing students, Professor John Truscott (1996) recommended all language teachers to completely abandon providing corrective response on surface errors as he believed that the nature of the correction process has not been critically taken into consideration by the researchers. Moreover, the side effects of error correction (that is, the time and energy that it requires in the writing classes.) have not been regarded by the researchers.

Responding to Truscott (1996), Ferris (1999, 2006) can probably be regarded as one of the most well-known researchers who have strictly refuted Truscott's (1996) strong criticism regarding the ineffectiveness and even harmfulness of corrective feedback in L2 writing. She questioned the theoretical and empirical bases of Truscott's extreme proposition and mentioned various evidences in support of her own position which could disprove Truscott's claims. She further summarized research findings on issues such as 1) the short and long-term positive influence of providing L2 writers with error feedback, 2) the extent to which L2 writing teachers' marking strategies affect the students' revisions, and finally 3) the relationship between error types, on the one hand, and error treatment, on the other.

## **THE PRESENT STUDY**

In the present study, the participants, taking an advanced course of writing in English, were required by the researcher to write 8 essays on suggested topics during one semester. One group was provided with indirect feedback on certain error categories (that is, Article, Verb Form, Preposition, Number Agreement, Conjunction, Noun, Pronoun, Adjective, and Adverb) that the researcher had detected in their writings. This group was also required to self-edit and revise their essays after the errors were marked by the researcher. The other group, on the other hand, was exposed to direct corrective feedback on every single error and was required to rewrite the essays that were fully corrected by the researcher. At the end of the semester, both groups were required to identify and correct 50 erroneous sentences randomly selected among the essays written by other students in the previous semester. Besides, for their final exam, both groups were given the same topic on which they were required to develop an essay of five paragraphs.

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The present study was aimed at providing reasonable responses to the ongoing controversy regarding the extent to which exposing L2 writers to direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback could have any significant effect on improving their accuracy in L2 writing. Hence, the following research questions were developed:

1. Is there any significant difference between direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback groups in terms of their proper correction of specified Error Categories in L2 writing?
2. Is there any significant difference between direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback groups in terms of their L2 Essay writing?

To provide reasonable answers to the aforementioned research questions, the researcher further developed the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference between direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback groups in terms of their proper correction of error categories in L2 writing.
2. There is no significant difference between direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback groups in terms of their L2 Essay writing.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The subjects participating in the study were 44 male and female PhD students of an advanced writing course, majoring in different engineering fields of study at a University of Technology in Tehran. They were randomly selected from a total population of 118 students who were required to take the course. To make sure that the subjects enjoyed the same level of overall proficiency in English, a TOEFL test including 40 questions on the Structure and Written Expression section of the test and 50 questions on the Reading Comprehension section of the test was administered by the researcher. Having scored and tabulated the results, the researcher could randomly select 44 male and female students among 90 students whose scores fell within +/- 2 standard deviations from the mean. The selected students were further randomly divided into two groups of 22 students.

### **Procedure**

To test the aforementioned null hypotheses, the researcher divided the subjects into two error feedback groups and assigned them to write eight essays during one semester. Moreover, to correct the grammatical

inaccuracies in their essays, she benefitted from two different approaches. While one group was provided with direct error corrective feedback on every single error, the other group was provided with indirect error corrective feedback on 9 error categories including Article, Verb Form, Noun, Pronoun, Preposition, Conjunction, Number agreement, Adjective, and Adverb. Moreover, the indirect error feedback group was also required to further self-edit their errors based on the feedback marked by the researcher in terms of the 9 error categories mentioned earlier. Their self-edited essays were further rechecked by the researcher in an attempt to make sure that the subjects had properly corrected the grammatical inaccuracies the researcher had marked in their essays on her first correction of the essays. At the end of the semester, both direct and indirect feedback groups were required to identify and correct the error categories they could possibly detect in 50 sentences randomly selected from the essays written by students of a similar course in the previous semester. In fact, these 50 erroneous sentences containing 159 errors varying in the 9 error categories mentioned above had been selected by the researcher from the archive of essays written by other students during previous writing courses.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The researcher scored the essays of both direct and indirect feedback groups in terms their grammatical accuracy based on a scale ranging from 0 to 6. In fact, the results revealed that the subjects' scores on the essay writing section of the study on the whole varied on a scale ranging between 2 to 5.5. Moreover, the researcher tabulated the scores obtained by the subjects in both direct and indirect error corrective feedback groups in terms of the errors among 9 error categories they could correctly identify and properly correct in 50 sentences containing 159 errors.

To test the aforementioned null hypotheses, the researcher actually conducted a few t-Tests on the scores obtained by the subjects in proper

identification and correction of errors they had made among 159 errors varying in 9 categories in 50 erroneous sentences as well as their essay writing scores in the 8 essays they had written during the semester. Tables one through five provide a summary of the results of the statistical analyses conducted in the current study.

**TABLE 1**  
**159 Errors in 9 Categories Identified by the Researcher in 50 Erroneous Sentences**

Errors	Art.	V. F.	Prep.	Num. Agree.	Conj.	Pron.	N.	Adj.	Adv.
Total	21	49	14	32	5	12	12	9	5

(Art.=Article); (V.F.=Verb Form); (Prep.=Preposition); (Num. Agree.=Number Agreement); (Conj.=Conjunction); (Pron.=Pronoun); (N.=Noun); (Adj.=Adjective); (Adv.=Adverb)

Table 1 shows the total number of 159 errors that the researcher could detect in 9 error categories in the 50 sentences randomly selected from the archive of essays belonging to former students of academic writing in previous semesters. On the whole, the number of errors in each category was as follows: **21** errors in Articles, **14** errors in Prepositions, **32** errors in Number Agreement, **12** errors in Nouns, **12** errors in Pronouns, **5** errors in Conjunctions, **49** errors in Verb Forms, **9** errors in Adjectives, and **5** errors in Adverbs.

**TABLE 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics for 9 Error Categories Properly Corrected by Direct Feedback Group in 50 Erroneous Sentences**

	Art.	V. F.	Prep.	Num.	Conj.	Pron.	N.	Adj.	Adv.
M.	3.77	21.72	2.4	11.68	0.45	3.31	1.86	2.27	0.86
SD.	4.17	3.66	1.43	11.68	0.5	0.77	1.55	1.2	0.71
V.	17.42	13.44	2.06	3.78	0.25	0.6	2.4	1.44	0.5

(Art.=Article); (V.F.=Verb Form); (Prep.=Preposition); (Num. Agree.=Number Agreement); (Conj.=Conjunction); (Pron.=Pronoun); (N.=Noun); (Adj.=Adjective); (Adv.=Adverb); (M=Mean); (SD=Standard Deviation); (V=Variance)

Table 2 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics of each of the 9 error categories identified and properly corrected by the subjects in the direct

feedback group.

**TABLE 3**  
**Descriptive Statistics of 9 Error Categories Properly Corrected**  
**by Indirect Feedback Group in 50 Erroneous Sentences**

	Art.	V. F.	Prep.	Num.	Conj.	Pron.	N.	Adj.	Adv.
M.	3.63	26.13	4.22	15.13	0.68	3.36	3.09	4.5	2
SD.	4.17	4.82	1.74	2.76	0.64	1.17	1.34	1.71	0.81
V.	4.71	23.26	3.04	7.63	0.41	1.38	1.8	2.92	0.66

(Art.=Article); (V.F.=Verb Form); (Prep.=Preposition); (Num. Agree.=Number Agreement); (Conj.= Conjunction); (Pron.=Pronoun); (N.=Noun); (Adj.=Adjective); (Adv.=Adverb); (M=Mean); (SD=Standard Deviation); (V=Variance)

Table 3 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics of each of the 9 error categories identified and properly corrected by the subjects in the indirect feedback group.

**TABLE 4**  
**Descriptive Statistics and t-Observed Value for the Error Categories Identified**  
**by Direct vs. Indirect Feedback Groups**

Statistics	Direct Feedback on Error Category Correction	Indirect Feedback on Error Category Correction
Mean	48.36	62.63
Standard Deviation	8.70	8.70
Variance	75.86	75.76
T <sub>obs</sub> Direct vs. Indirect on Error Category Correction		2.47
Df		21

P< 0.05

Table 4 summarizes the descriptive statistics and t-observed value of the direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback on the number of errors that the subjects in direct vs. indirect groups could correctly identify among the total number of 159 errors identified in 50 erroneous sentences varying in the 9 error categories mentioned earlier.

**TABLE 5**  
**Descriptive Statistics and t-Observed Value of Direct vs. Indirect Feedback Groups on L2 Essay Writing**

Statistics	Direct Feedback on Essay Writing	Indirect Feedback on Essay Writing
Mean	2.72	4.81
Standard Deviation	0.79	0.89
Variance	0.63	0.79
T <sub>obs</sub> Direct vs. Indirect on Essay Writing		3.37
Df		21

P < 0.05

Table 5 provides the descriptive statistics as well as the t-observed value of the scores obtained by the subjects on writing 8 essays after they had been exposed to direct vs. indirect error corrective feedback by the researcher during one semester.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having tabulated the scores obtained by the subjects in both groups, the researcher further made a comparison between the variance of both direct and indirect feedback groups in terms of the specified 9 error categories (that is, articles, verb forms, prepositions, number agreements, conjunctions, pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs). The results revealed that the indirect feedback group enjoyed a higher variance than that of the direct feedback group except for the higher variance in the direct error corrective feedback group in terms of proper identification and correction of “articles.” In other words, the performance of indirect feedback group as compared to that of the direct feedback group in terms of identifying 9 error categories mentioned earlier was significantly better except in the case of articles.

Moreover, to test the first null hypothesis, the researcher conducted a t-Test on the scores obtained in Error Category Correction by the subjects in direct vs. indirect feedback groups. The results revealed that the t-observed

value between the two error corrective feedback groups in terms of their Error Category Correction was 2.47. Making a comparison between the observed t-value and the table of critical t-values, the researcher realized that at the 0.05 level of significance, the t-value observed in Error Category Correction exceeded that of the t-critical value of 2.08 at 21 degree of freedom. Therefore, the first null hypothesis could be safely rejected with 95% of certainty.

Finally, to test the second null hypothesis, the researcher further conducted another t-Test on the scores obtained on writing 8 essays during one semester by the subjects in both direct vs. indirect error feedback groups. The t-observed value between the two error corrective feedback groups in terms of their L2 essay writing was 2.37 which exceeded the t-critical value of 2.08 at 21 degree of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the second null hypothesis could also be safely rejected with 95% of certainty level.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

According to Clark (1975) and Clifford (1979), providing feedback on writing errors should be regarded as essential information intended to motivate rather than punish students who have made those errors so that they shall make necessary corrections and increase their writing ability while relying on their own capabilities (Kulhavy, 1977). Moreover, there is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding the extent to which exposure to two different types of feedback, namely indirect vs. direct error corrective feedback could possibly have any significant effect on the subjects' ability to identify the error categories occurring in their written texts as well as improve their ability to self-edit their own written texts.

As stated by Fox (1992), Raimes (1992), Ascher (1993), Lane and Lange (1993) and Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993), researchers and teachers of ESL writing have actually become aware of the significance of providing students with indirect error corrective feedback and helping them to self-edit their own

written texts and remove their grammatical inaccuracies before submitting the finalized draft to the teacher. In fact, editing is the final step in the writing process which requires students to tidy up their texts as they are preparing their final draft to be evaluated by the teacher. In other words, “editing within process writing is meaningful because correction is not done for its own sake but as part of the process of making communication as clear and unambiguous as possible to an audience” (Seow, 2002, pp. 318-319).

The present study was carried out by the researcher basically to find out whether there was any significant difference between the type of feedback to which L2 writing students are exposed in terms of improving their ability to correct certain error categories, on the one hand and to write more grammatically accurate essays, on the other. The findings revealed that the subjects’ exposure to indirect vs. direct error corrective feedback did have a significant effect on their performance in identifying and correcting certain error categories. Since the subjects in the indirect error corrective feedback group were also required to further self-edit their own written texts based on the error categories marked by the teacher, the study also revealed that there was a significant difference in the subjects’ performance in indirect error corrective feedback group in terms of their overall essay writing ability.

Although the study had some limitations in terms of the number of students taking the course at the semester when the study was being conducted, the researcher believes that the findings of the present study can possibly have the following implications for the ESL writing teachers. In fact, based on the findings of the study, these teachers are recommended to provide their students with indirect error corrective feedback on error categories as opposed to direct error corrective feedback on every single error. In fact, the latter feedback is likely to deprive the L2 learners from the chance of getting more actively involved in the process of editing their own texts as a means to become more proficient and self-reliant in L2 writing. Actually, providing students with indirect error corrective feedback on categories of errors observable in their written texts is capable of helping them focus their attention on the inaccuracies marked by the teacher and try to learn how to

self-edit and finally overcome these grammatical inaccuracies in later revisions of their own written texts.

In short, the researcher believes that the ESL writing teachers need to regard the first draft of their students' written texts as "a dream that needs to be re-dreamed" [and further revised by the students themselves] (Handeland, 2008) through "fresh eyes" (Al\_Azzeh, 2008) of the teachers providing their students with indirect error corrective feedback.

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