

## Teachers' Corrective Feedback Strategies in Assessing Essay Writing

Noor Hashima Abd Aziz\*

School of Languages, Civilisation & Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Arsaythamby Veloo

School of Education & Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

### Abstract

Feedback has been an important topic of discussion in language learning. Although research on written corrective feedback is available, there is little research on the specific strategies employed by teachers in order to provide feedback on their students' essay writing. This paper reports part of a larger research. One of the objectives of this study was to explore corrective feedback strategies employed by the English as a second language (ESL) teachers and English language expert raters when assessing their students' written essays. This study used qualitative case study which involved 12 participants. Data were collected through interviewing nine English language teachers and three English language expert raters to obtain their pedagogic practices in providing written corrective feedback. The strategies identified are based on Ellis's typology of strategies for providing written corrective feedback. The findings showed that the preferred written corrective feedback strategy used by the teachers and raters was Metalinguistic Corrective Feedback with Direct Corrective Feedback and Focused Corrective Feedback used by only a few of them. This study has pedagogical implications in that it explains the ESL teachers/expert raters' pedagogical attitude and practices towards error correction and their preferred written corrective feedback strategies in dealing with error correction.

**Keywords:** Written corrective feedback; Essay writing; English as a second language (ESL) teachers; Expert raters; Metalinguistic corrective feedback.



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### 1. Introduction

Corrective feedback has received a lot of attention from researchers and teachers. [Hattie and Timperley \(2007\)](#) define feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding". A more specific definition on corrective feedback is "the feedback that learners receive on the linguistic errors they make in their oral or written production in a second language (L2)" ([Sheen and Ellis, p. 593, cited in Hinkel \(2011\)](#)). There are two types of corrective feedback: written corrective feedback or oral corrective feedback. The focus of this paper is on written corrective feedback (WCF). WCF involves both input-providing feedback (direct correction) and output-prompting feedback (indirect correction) ([Sheen and Ellis, cited in Hinkel \(2011\)](#)). Direct correction means providing learners with the correct form or reformulating the entire text and indirect correction means indicating an error has been made through the use of codes or symbols.

Corrective feedback is a universal issue that is debatable. There are conflicting views on whether students' work, especially errors should be corrected or not. A debate occurred between ([Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 2007](#)) on the issue of providing written feedback. [Truscott \(1996\)](#) argued that grammar correction in L2 writing needs to be abandoned because of three reasons: 1) many research show that error correction is not effective; 2) based on theoretical and practical reasons, error correction is assumed to be not effective; and 3) it brings harmful effects. However, [Ferris \(1996\)](#) opposed this view by saying that students' essays should be corrected so that they can improve on their writing skill. In 2004, Ferris responded to Truscott's article by highlighting three observations she made concerning studies on error correction. The first observation is that very few studies compared correction versus no correction aspect. Ferris pointed out that three out of the six studies on error correction found the benefits of correcting errors. The second observation is the inconsistencies in the research design used. The third observation is that the existing research can only predict the positive effects of error correction. [Truscott \(2007\)](#) again argued that correcting students' essays would bring very small benefits. Besides Truscott who was against error correction, [Krashen \(1982\)](#) provided several reasons that correcting errors should be avoided. One reason is that through error correction, the student will be put on a defensive state, which result in the student trying to avoid mistakes and avoiding difficult constructions. As such, the student will focus more on form and less on meaning. However, [Krashen \(1982\)](#) did not deny that error correction may be useful in certain situations and he proposed that we limit the conscious learning of rules for Monitor use, that is, the rules to be learned should be learnable, portable, and not yet acquired.

On the other hand, most second language acquisition researchers find corrective feedback to be a positive strategy in language learning. [Bitchener and Ferris \(2012\)](#) asserted that WCF is an effective approach in teaching if "it is provided at a time when learners are most likely to notice it, understand it, and internalize (uptake) it. Thus, its

role is to help learners identify where their errors have been made and to provide them with information about why their output was incorrect and on how they can correct it” (p. 125). If the intention of providing corrective feedback is to help learners understand and know how to use the target language accurately, then the types of error that are most likely to be treated effectively through WCF are those whose form or structure lies within the learner’s zone of “readiness” or within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). An understanding of the Socio-cultural theory of human mental processing proposed by Vygotsky helps to explain the role of interaction. The assumption made in this theory is that all cognitive development, including language development, happens as a consequence of social interactions between individuals. In this sense, language learners need to interact, especially with their teachers to obtain feedback or progress on their essays (Ellis *et al.*, 2006).

Researchers have focused on the effects of certain WCF strategies on improving students’ writing (Benson and DeKeyser, 2018; Bitchener *et al.*, 2005; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008; Ellis *et al.*, 2008; Sheen, 2007). A study by Bitchener *et al.* (2005) investigated the extent to which different types of feedback (direct, explicit written feedback and student–researcher 5 minute individual conferences; direct, explicit written feedback only) on three targeted error categories (past simple tense, the definite article and prepositions) helped L2 writers improve the accuracy of their use in new pieces of writing. It found a significant effect for the combination of written and conference feedback on accuracy levels in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article in new pieces of writing but no overall effect on accuracy improvement for feedback types when the three error categories were considered as a single group. In addition, Sheen (2007) examined the effect of two types of written corrective feedback (a direct-only correction group and a direct metalinguistic correction group) on the acquisition of articles by adult intermediate ESL learners. The study found that the direct metalinguistic group performed better than the direct-only correction group. A study by Bitchener and Knoch (2008) found (1) that the students who received all three WCF options (direct corrective feedback, written and oral meta-linguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback and written metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback only) outperformed those who did not receive WCF and (2) that there was no difference in the extent to which migrant and international students improved on the accuracy of their writing as a result of WCF. Ellis *et al.* (2008) conducted a study to compare the effects of focused and unfocused WCF on the accuracy of the English indefinite and definite articles. The focused group received correction of just article errors on three written narratives while the unfocused group received correction of article errors alongside corrections of other errors. The WCF was equally effective for the focused and unfocused groups. A more recent study by Benson and DeKeyser (2018) investigated the effect of either direct or metalinguistic written feedback on errors with the simple past tense and the present perfect tense. The study found that the participants with greater language analytic ability (LAA) proved more likely to achieve gains in the direct feedback group than in the metalinguistic group, whereas learners with lower LAA benefited more from metalinguistic feedback. All these studies show that WCF is effective in different types of strategies.

According to Ellis (2009), there are five basic strategies for providing written corrective feedback (CF): 1) Direct CF - The teacher provides the student with the correct form; 2) Indirect CF – The teacher indicates that an error exists by indicating + locating the error or indication only but does not provide the correction; 3) Metalinguistic CF – The teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error such as by writing codes in the margin or giving brief grammatical descriptions; 4) The focus of the feedback means the attempts made by the teacher to correct all (or most) of the students’ errors or selects one or two specific types of error to correct. There are two types of focus feedback:

a) Unfocused CF which is extensive, b) Focused CF which is intensive; and 5) Electronic feedback. Hattie (as cited in Hattie and Timperley (2007) who analysed the effect sizes of feedback found considerable variability in feedbacks which means that some types of feedback are more powerful than others. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the strategies employed by ESL teachers and expert raters based on the typology of strategies proposed by Ellis (2009).

## 2. Methodology

This paper is part of a research grant. It reports on one of the objectives of this study, that is, to explore corrective feedback strategies employed by the English as a second language (ESL) teachers and English language expert raters when assessing students’ written essays. This study employed qualitative case study research design. According to Merriam (2009), the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in “delimiting the object of study, the case”. This design was chosen because the researchers were interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing. In this study, the phenomenon to be investigated, that is the corrective feedback strategies employed were identified by focusing on each case of English language teacher or expert rater. The participants consisted of nine English language teachers who had no experience assessing the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) or the Malaysian Certificate of Education papers and three expert raters who were familiar with assessing SPM examination papers. SPM is a very important national examination at the secondary school level before entry into a university or other higher education institutions in Malaysia. Those who have assessed SPM examination would be familiar with three scoring methods: analytical, holistic and primary trait scoring methods. In this study, the three expert raters belonged to this group. The expert raters were chosen to see if they have different ideas or strategies about using WCF. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) possessed various teaching experience, and (2) obtained a degree related to English language teaching or already in the teaching profession. Pseudonyms were used in identifying the participants in order to protect their identity and for ethical and legal issues. Interviews were done with the participants to obtain their views on providing WCF to

students. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then the written corrective feedback strategies were identified based on Ellis's strategies.

Table 1 displays the profiles of the participants in this study. There were altogether 12 participants which consisted of ten females and two males (Osman and Syaheeran). In terms of the number of years teaching, it varies from 1 year to 20 years. Surprisingly, one teacher and one rater majored in a different field but had the experience of teaching English because they possessed Diploma in Education. In terms of having the experience assessing SPM papers, only one English teacher had the experience and the other two were language officers. The three expert raters were involved in assessing SPM papers which ranged from 5-7 years.

**Table-1.** Profile of the Participants (pseudonyms)

Teachers/Raters	Teaching Experience	Qualification	Experience assessing SPM papers
Amylia	6	B.Ed. TESL	None
Badariah	1	B. Human Sc. (English Language and Literature)	None
Dyana	19	B.Ed. TESL	None
Farah	6	B. Ed. TESL	None
Grace	4	Bachelor of Applied Language (English for Professional Communication)	None
Hayati	10	Bachelor in Economic	None
Janice	20	B. Ed. TESL	None
Muhaya	19	B. Ed. TESL	None
Osman	6	B. Ed. TESL	None
Syaheeran	12	B. Ed. TESL (Language Officer)	5
Tina	9	B.Ed TESOL	7
Wani	6	Bachelor in Computer Science (Language Officer)	6

### 3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are reported according to the participants interviewed and the verbatim transcription done. The teachers and expert raters were asked to share their experience in providing corrective feedback in relation to students' essay writing. All the 9 English language teachers had no experience assessing SPM examination which is a national examination whereas the 3 expert raters had experienced in assessing SPM examination.

#### *Amylia*

She is an English teacher who has 6 years of teaching experience. She used Metalinguistic CF by giving clues on the errors in the form of footnote at the end of her students' essays, especially for the good students. Amylia explains her practice as follows:

There are several ways that I practice when giving feedback for my students for their writing. First is written feedback, where the feedback is written in a form of footnote at the end of their essay. Written feedback is used for the front classes, where the students will be able to understand the feedback given and act accordingly based on the feedback given.

#### *Badariah*

She is a teacher who has only 1 year of teaching experience. She resorted to Direct CF by providing the correct form of the errors on her students' papers.

On the students' paper, I only correct their serious mistakes, for example mistakes in simple present tense and simple past tense. Usually I do not correct their minor mistakes, to avoid them feeling down seeing their essays full of red marks. In addition, I always write positive comments and compliment on their paper such as "excellent", "very good", "good work", "interesting story" and "good effort". Lastly, I will ask all the students to do the correction. The excellent essays will be pinned on the front board next to the whiteboard as writing samples.

#### *Dyana*

She is an experienced teacher who has been teaching English language for 19 years. Dyana opted for Metalinguistic CF by writing notes presumably by giving brief grammatical descriptions on the students' papers when providing feedback to her students. She gave the following rationales for doing so.

By writing the comments directly on students work or making notes will make them feel less humiliate rather than we burst out their mistakes in front of the classmates. Writing good feedback requires an understanding that language does more than describing our feelings but also our deep thought towards them.

#### *Farah*

She has been teaching for 6 years. She employed Metalinguistic CF by giving clues in the form of underlining the errors and then writing notes about the errors.

Usually, I will give feedback to my students in written type which I wrote notes on their paper after I underline the errors on their essay.

#### *Grace*

She has been teaching for 4 years. She practiced Focused CF by writing her overall comments about the essay for each student which can be regarded as intensive.

What I do is, I write down my overall comment on the answer sheet. I guess, the comments then are only shared between me and that particular student personally. Sometimes, if need be, I also write down some improvements that they can do to make their writing better.

*Hayati*

She is an experienced English teacher who has been teaching for 10 years. She specifically used Metalinguistic CF by providing clues in the form of grammatical descriptions.

Previously, I have mentioned about the focus of my corrective feedback on their papers. I would also jot down my appraisal words for motivation purposes. Though it is said holistic made assessing easier for the teacher, I still give feedback on their paper, highlighting their weaknesses. Normally, I provide a metalinguistic type of corrective feedback, emphasizing the grammatical nature of errors.

*Janice*

She is an experienced teacher who has been teaching English language for 20 years. She employed Metalinguistic CF in the form of using symbols as clues for the students to think about the correct form.

After assessing the papers, I will discuss and write the errors and mistakes they have done in their writing. I will choose one paper and write one by one the errors on the whiteboard. They understand the errors that they have done by looking at the marking symbols. Then I will correct the errors and they will copy in their notebooks.

*Muhaya*

She is also an experienced teacher who has been teaching English language for 19 years.

She used Focused CF by selecting specific error types for correction.

Assess their works; detect any similar mistakes and the number of students that did the same mistakes. Decide afterward whether collective or personal explanation is the best according to the number of students.

*Osman*

He has been teaching English for 6 years. Although Osman claimed that he used recasts CF but actually Osman used Direct CF, that is, providing the correct form of the errors.

I use recasts corrective feedback method by writing the correct answer on their exam paper.

*Syaheeran*

At present, he is a language officer. He has taught English for 12 years and has 5 years of experience assessing SPM examination. Based on his exposure using scoring methods in SPM examination, Syaheeran used Metalinguistic CF to mark students' essays, that is, providing clues in the form of symbols.

In the writing, if the students wrongly spell the word 'immediently' which they should spell 'immediately' the teacher would mark wavy line. The wavy line indicates spelling error. So when the students check their essays after the marking would realise the word that they have written is actually wrongly spelt. As a result, they would not repeat the mistake for the next writing after they realise the mistake. For single word error in the serious error the marking symbol is straight line. The symbol used to indicate serious errors like tenses, punctuation and sentence structure.

*Tina*

She has been teaching English for 9 years and has been assessing SPM examination for 7 years. She used Metalinguistic CF by indicating clues in the form of underlining errors and using symbols to indicate the errors.

For holistic scoring, the way I marked was, I underlined errors and used marking symbols which at a glance after marking the scripts, the red marks would act as guidelines for me to give marks to the students holistically. When returning the essays, I would ask my students to look at their essays and try to correct the underlined mistakes on their own or with their help, if both fails, they could always seek for my assistance.

*Wani*

She is a Language Officer who has taught English for 6 years and also has 6 years of experience assessing SPM examination. She used Metalinguistic CF whereby she indicated the grammatical errors and wrote the aspect of the errors to be corrected on the last page.

To help them to improve their writing skills, I marked the scripts according to the practice done by the national examiners standard. I highlight all the grammatical errors and write down the aspect of their error on the last page of their essays. This would help me explain to them why their test scores deserve the mark and they have to work on the comments given to improve their writing.

This study found that majority (8 out of 12) of the participants, that is, 5 ESL teachers and the 3 expert raters used Metalinguistic CF to correct students' essay writing. On the other hand, two of the ESL teachers resorted to Direct CF and another two employed Focused CF. In this study, Metalinguistic CF has been found to be the preferred strategy for WCF most probably because of the nature of it, that is, teachers or raters can use clues such as codes or symbols to identify the errors. Then the students are expected to recognize these clues in order for them to improve on their essay writing. The teachers would do a follow-up explanation of the errors through Oral Corrective Feedback. It can be assumed that 2 of the English teachers who are considered as novice, with 1 and 6 years of teaching experience opted for Direct CF because they thought the students would learn more by knowing the correct form of the errors written on their essay scripts. Another two teachers resorted to Focused CF presumably they wanted to focus on similar errors or aspects made by most of their students.

An interesting finding from this study is that the ESL teachers, Badariah, Dyana, Grace, and Hayati highlighted their practice of writing motivation or positive remarks on their students' essays. They seem to share the same opinion as Krashen (1982) in that students shouldn't be put on the defensive state.

## 4. Conclusions

In this study, Metalinguistic CF has been found to be the preferred WCF strategy used by the ESL teachers and expert raters. This study corroborates findings from Sheen (2007) and Benson and DeKeyser (2018) that metalinguistic CF is a strategy that can benefit students. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) suggest that “the provision of direct error correction with written meta-linguistic explanation would be more effective . . . , it not only tells the learner what the correction is but explainsthecause of the error in grammatical terms” (p. 133).

Besides the intention of providing effective corrective feedback on students' essays in order for the students to improve on their writing, English language teachers need to embed the practice of giving motivation or positive remarks. One way of doing this is through teachers pedagogical attitude towards errors (Brown, 2012). Teachers and especially students should be aware that making errors is a natural process in language learning.

Since giving feedback is part and parcel of teaching, teachers need to find effective corrective feedback strategies to improve their students' learning. Future research can be done by interviewing students to gain insight on error correction or research which compare teachers feedback and how students perceive the feedback given by their teachers.

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