

# A Research on Written Feedback in English Writing Course of English Majors

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Written feedback in English writing classes serves as the primary mode of feedback. By comparing direct corrective feedback and indirect corrective feedback in addressing content and form, this paper argues that indirect corrective feedback better aligns with the needs of English majors. Multiple factors influence the choice of written feedback methods, and teachers should carefully select the most appropriate approach based on student characteristics to maximize the effectiveness of feedback.

*Keywords:* English writing, written feedback, indirect feedback, corrective feedback

## Introduction

English writing classes are exclusively evaluated based on written expression abilities, and the teacher's feedback in these classes is a highly relied-upon source for students across all subjects. Students need written feedback in English writing course much more than in other subjects. This is mainly caused by the unique characteristic of writing course itself. The class teaching performance is submitted to teachers in one form: written homework, no speaking, no presentation, no argument but pure written form. Even for some oral interaction in class time, the final version of students' work is a written composition on a notebook. Compared to courses of speaking, listening, and reading, students tend to give greater consideration to teachers' written feedback in writing classes, which serves as a crucial factor motivating them to improve their writing quality. Since writing assignments are submitted in written form, oral feedback tends to be overlooked by students, who instead attach greater importance to the written feedback provided on their assignments. Teachers' feedback should not only focus on the accuracy of students' language, but also the overall content of their essays, fundamentally enhancing their writing skills (Chen & Li, 2009). Similar to other subjects, teacher feedback in writing classes falls into two categories: content feedback and form feedback (Seedhouse, 1996). Form feedback is relatively straightforward and widely accepted by students. However, content feedback, especially corrective content feedback, often proves controversial and challenging. Truscott (1996) summarized second language teaching and related empirical research since the 1970s, arguing that corrective feedback on language in second language writing is not only ineffective but also harmful. Conversely, some scholars believe that teachers' corrective language feedback is effective (Chandler, 2003).

## Common Forms of Written Feedback in English Writing Classes

Written feedback provided by teachers refers to information given to students to improve and enhance

learners' writing skills. This includes corrective feedback for superficial errors in learners' essays (primarily referring to grammatical, lexical, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and other linguistic errors), also known as form-focused feedback, and inductive feedback that targets discourse-level aspects, such as content and structure (Guo & Qin, 2006). For English majors, there is typically less form-focused feedback due to the four-step process commonly required for written assignments: outlining, drafting, revising, and submitting a final copy. In English as second language (ESL) writing classes, students are generally not allowed to submit a final draft without revision, and revisions are limited to three or fewer corrections, encouraging self-editing. This self-revision process targets to students' correction without teachers' feedback and they should submit the homework after careful review to limit the errors to less than three. In some cases, this submission actually requires students to submit the third or fourth edition. During this self-revision process, students typically identify and correct most linguistic problems, such as spelling errors, third-person singular verb forms, subject-verb agreement, inappropriate collocations, and part-of-speech or form errors.

Chinese is distinguished from English in some specific aspects. To name some examples: Chinese has no singular or plural form of nouns, but English has this difference. Another common mistake of Chinese learners is the verb form of singular third person. Even excellent students or people who have lived in the English-speaking countries for years may ignore this and forget the "s" at the end of verbs. These two phenomena are unique of English and the Chinese learners must be highly alert when these sentences including these changes are made. This is common but not a serious problem in written assignment, because students can correct these errors if they review their written homework carefully enough. In another sentence, these mistakes are easy to neglect but also easy to discover without teachers' help.

For ESL students, the content-focused feedback provided by teachers is more significant than form-focused feedback, as it is the content they wish to learn and master. Content feedback encompasses crucial aspects, such as essay themes, topic sentences, paragraphing, central ideas, selection and organization of supporting materials, coherence between introductions and conclusions, and concise language. For example, the homework entitled "The Way to Success" needs a clear definition of success. While the learners may not have a clear picture in their mind of what success truly is, they may submit a homework with a definition of success like "Success is you can do whatever you want to do". If the theme of the homework is limited to this understanding, the later explanation may not be convincing enough. So, the teacher needs to give content-focused feedback to change the theme into a more acceptable form like "Success is you know what you want and how to achieve it". It is easy to change the content, but it is difficult to make the students accept the feedback.

### **Direct Corrective Feedback vs. Indirect Corrective Feedback**

Corrective feedback refers to negative linguistic evidence, where teachers or others respond to errors and problems in students' language, aiming to provide information for authors to revise their work (Keh, 1990). The essence of corrective feedback is to negate students' original content, which can easily evoke dissatisfaction and confrontational attitudes if no alternative solutions are provided, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of the feedback. Corrective feedback can be divided into direct and indirect forms. Direct feedback involves teachers explicitly pointing out and correcting key errors in students' assignments, while indirect feedback merely prompts students to errors, for instance, by marking error lines, annotating error types in margins, underlining errors, or providing a total count of errors per line (Chen & Li, 2009). The prevalent practice of direct corrective feedback involves teachers crossing out errors and writing the correct forms directly on students' work. Direct correction

prompts learners to compare their language with that of others, making it easier for them to notice the gaps between their own output and the target language. According to Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, not all input is equally valuable; only input that is incorporated into learners' noticing systems can be absorbed. To the content-related problems, indirect feedback can encourage students to probe into their compositions. The following are examples of indirect feedback to the overall format of paragraphs or passages.

A. Clarity and structure:

"Your ideas flow well together, but consider adding “过渡句” (transitional sentences) between paragraphs to make the connections even clearer for the reader."

"The introduction effectively grabs attention, but it might benefit from a more specific thesis statement to guide the reader through your main points."

B. Vocabulary and language use:

"You have used some impressive vocabulary! Try incorporating a few more varied word choices to avoid repetition and enhance the richness of your writing."

"Consider checking for any idiomatic expressions that might not be familiar to an international audience, ensuring your language remains accessible and inclusive."

C. Sentence variety and complexity:

"Your writing is coherent and easy to follow. To add depth, you could experiment with longer sentences that combine ideas in more complex ways."

"Great job varying sentence lengths! Sometimes, breaking up longer sentences into shorter, punchier ones can improve clarity and reader engagement."

D. Evidence and support:

"Your arguments are thought-provoking! To strengthen your paper, consider adding more specific examples or quotes from sources to back up your claims."

"While you've provided some evidence, including additional data or anecdotes would further solidify your points and make them more persuasive."

E. Format and mechanics:

"Your formatting is mostly consistent, but there are a few places where margins or font sizes vary. Reviewing the assignment guidelines for formatting requirements could help maintain uniformity."

"Your grammar and punctuation are mostly correct, but watch out for tense consistency throughout the essay. Using a grammar checker or proofreading a second time can catch these subtleties."

F. Overall presentation:

"Your writing showcases a strong understanding of the topic. To make your paper even more polished, consider revisiting your introduction and conclusion to ensure they effectively frame your discussion."

"The body of your essay is well-developed, but adding a concluding paragraph that summarizes key points and reflects on the significance of your findings could leave a lasting impression on the reader."

Ferris and Roberts (2001) observed that students who received direct feedback performed better in revising their original texts compared to those who received indirect feedback, whereas students with indirect feedback demonstrated significantly higher linguistic accuracy when writing new essays. This finding is intuitive and aligns with practical teaching experiences. When teachers directly point out students' errors and offer corrections, students can visually compare the correct and incorrect versions, leaving a clear impression. Consequently, when writing similar essays immediately afterward, students who received direct corrective feedback tended to

incorporate the revisions and produce improved texts in the short term. In terms of the effectiveness of teaching feedback, direct corrective feedback shows more immediate effects than indirect feedback, suggesting that its assessment is more pronounced in similar writing tasks. Chen and Li's (2009) research challenges the notion in the second language writing community that indirect feedback better supports students' long-term development by revealing that students who received direct feedback for new essays exhibited higher linguistic accuracy.

Lalande (1982) noted that indirect feedback is facilitative learning, providing opportunities for problem-solving. It allows students to identify and address gaps in their knowledge, making corrections within their capabilities, thereby promoting the development of interlanguage. Indirect feedback resembles the request for clarification and recasts in single-type feedback, where teachers indicate the type of error without prescribing the solution, encouraging students to think and find solutions themselves. Undoubtedly, solving problems independently requires more time and effort, but the answers students arrive at tend to be more memorable, enabling them to avoid similar issues in the future. In contrast, direct error correction allows students to obtain correct answers through imitation in the short term, lacking the critical thinking process necessary for deep understanding and long-term avoidance of errors. This explains why teachers should prioritize indirect feedback in written corrective feedback, making requests for clarification and encouraging students to propose new solutions.

Ferris and Roberts' (2001) survey revealed that learners preferred feedback forms where errors were underlined and described, followed by direct error correction and then simply underlining errors. Indirect corrective feedback not only imposes higher demands on students, but also increases teachers' workload. Students must think, identify issues, and write new ideas or arguments to make their essays more natural and persuasive. Teachers, in turn, need to review these revisions, which partly explains why indirect feedback is less frequently adopted.

From a psychological perspective, indirect corrective feedback elicits the least confrontation and is more readily accepted by students. Teachers merely request clarification, and students independently find solutions through thinking or discussion. This feedback is perceived as advice rather than negation, whereas direct proposals for revision, especially regarding content or structure, can be seen as rejection, leading to confrontation or dissatisfaction. Only feedback that is adopted by students is effective. Direct corrective feedback shows students the correct answers, but they may not apply them in the long run. With indirect feedback, students find their own solutions, fostering positive psychological responses and long-term memory, ultimately benefiting them over the course of their studies.

### **Factors Influencing the Acceptance of Feedback Methods**

Ashwell (2000) pointed out that essay quality is less sensitive to feedback than linguistic form. Essay writing requires extensive practice, and while grammatical and pronunciation errors can be precisely corrected, essays encompass various topics, styles, and subjects, making it difficult to accurately assess whether students have incorporated teachers' feedback. Most research compares writing feedback between ESL and foreign language (FL) students. ESL students, with better English proficiency and a willingness to challenge themselves, tend to accept indirect feedback more readily. In contrast, FL students primarily aim to pass English proficiency tests, so their learning goals are narrow and motivated by short-term exam considerations, leading them to prefer direct corrective feedback. Within the same class, Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997) found that teachers should provide different types of evaluative feedback to students with varying writing abilities. As students' writing

skills improve and shared knowledge between teachers and students increases, the frequency of feedback should gradually decrease, with the language of feedback varying according to the issues addressed. Conrad and Goldsmith (1999) identified additional factors influencing successful revisions beyond the linguistic features of feedback, including students' current language proficiency, command of language, familiarity with essay topics, perspectives on the arguments presented, and academic pressure. The effectiveness of written feedback varies by individual and discipline.

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