Indirect and Direct Feedback in L2 Composition: Using Corrective Feedback (CF) in Japanese EFL

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the use of Corrective Feedback (CF) has been a particularly perplexing issue of L2 writing with some theorists even suggesting that giving no feedback at all yields the same results as giving extensive feedback. However, newer findings are beginning to suggest that CF is vital to the drafting process of EFL writing, furthermore, indirect feedback is now the most advocated form of CF as it requires learner-inquiry and metacognitive skills. This synthesis explains the on-going debate about CF, the different types of errors in L2 writing, the two main forms of CF and the importance of learner preference in hopes of identifying the best approaches for EFL writing courses in Japanese higher education.

Keywords : Corrective Feedback, indirect and direct feedback, treatable and untreatable errors, error correction, teacher feedback, L2 writing, error correction preference, Japanese EFL

Introduction

"Despite [the] increasing emphasis on oral response and the use of peers as sources of feedback, teacher written response continues to play a central role in most second-language (L2) and foreign language (FL) writing classes" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 84). Researchers and authors have long debated the tactics—and even the usefulness—of corrective feedback (CF) in L2 process writing (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b; Leki, 1991; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Russell & Spada, 2006; Truscott, 1996, 2007); however, findings in EFL and ESL have shown that CF does have a dramatic effect on how learners self-correct themselves, making it a far superior method to withholding correction altogether (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) with many studies showing that CF is helpful in promoting grammar acquisition in subsequent drafts (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 1999; Russell & Spada, 2006).

There are mainly two forms of CF: direct and indirect. Through the use of *direct feedback*, teachers draw the students' focus to the error and explicitly show them how to make the corrections; in contrast, *indirect feedback* uses implicit forms, which enable learners to discover how to fix the errors themselves. "While feedback *alone* [is] not responsible for improvement in language accuracy, it is likely to be one important factor," (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 85) for instance, research using surveys and interviews, has also shown that students' preferences can also play a large role in how they attain to error correction (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). As noted by Ferris and Hedgcock (2013), "a great deal of research activity over the past 16 years . . . [shows] that corrective feedback, provided under specific conditions, can indeed help L2 writers" (p. 282); therefore, the question is not whether educators should give correction, but rather, how and when to give it (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Ferris, 2004).

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"[W]hile feedback is a central aspect of L2 writing programs across the world, the research literature has not been unequivocally positive about its role" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 83). This contradiction has also been an issue for many EFL educators in Japan, as a study by Robb et al (1986) revealed that the actual type of feedback had no significance on the students' written accuracy. Nevertheless, Robb et al did not take into proper considerations for *no feedback* as a variable, and in this way, a study by Ashwell (2000), has revealed that Japanese students who did not receive feedback, actually made no real advancements, illustrating the necessity of CF for helping Japanese EFL students' recognize and self-correct their own mistakes. In essence, written feedback research has had a turbulent past with the type of errors, feedback methods, and students' preferences being some of the most contemplated issues—even in Japanese EFL—advocating the need to establish practical techniques and approaches for error correction in L2 writing.

The Corrective Feedback Debate

Since the publication of *The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes*, when Truscott (1996) took a strong stance against grammar correction in L2 composition, a large disagreement about the need for feedback was spawned. Truscott maintained that "one should not expect corrections to have much effect on students' self-editing in the long term, and possibly not even in the short term" (p. 349). Furthermore, Truscott even suggested abandoning grammar correction, because of the harmful effect it has on learners, i.e., it wastes time to give, it is hard to understand, direct correction is easily forgotten and students' self-confidence can be affected. In response, Ferris (1999), one of the major proponents of corrective feedback, criticized Truscott for the numerous overgeneralizations and inconsistencies in his research and claimed that Truscott overlooked the positive effects of error correction which were easily observable in many studies. "[Researchers], in other words, cannot expect that a target form will be aquired either immediately or permanently after it has been highlighted through feedback . . . it needs time and repetition before it can help learners" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 85). After a number of rebuttals between the two researchers, Ferris (2004) published a comprehensive analysis reviewing all of the papers that Truscott cited and ultimately dismissed his findings. Ferris stated that "the research base on the 'big question'—does error feedback help L2 student writers?—is [truly] inadequate" (p. 50). Ferris believed there are so many complexities that are prevalent in the L2 writing process that the current research base is not extensive enough to construct oversimplified assumptions; furthermore, "positive evidence from various lines of research—SLA studies, [and] short-term experimental studies . . . lend support to the argument that we cannot dismiss error correction's potential" (p. 60). Essentially, it is the responsibility of teachers and researchers to look at what kinds of correction are most successful and why they help learners develop L2 writing skills, because "students appear to attend to teacher error corrections and in most cases use them to make accurate changes in their texts" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 85). Thus, "while marking mechanical errors can be frustrating, the view that there is no direct connection between correction and learning is greatly overstated" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 84). Moreover, there are other intricacies of error correction that L2 teachers must attend to before making generalizations about the actual type of correction to give.

Treatable and Untreatable Errors

Though the ideas of what truthfully composes an error in L2 writing is still perplexing, Ferris and Hedgcock (2013) make the distinction: "errors consist of morphological, syntactic, and lexical deviations from the grammatical rules of a language that violate the intuitions or expectations of literate adult native speakers of that language" (p. 282). In a previous L2 writing study, Ferris (1999) brought to light two different categories of mistakes in L2 composition, which were defined as *treatable* and *untreatable* errors. Ferris stated that treatable errors are those, which have an easier chance of being corrected because they follow a set of rules (e.g. fragments, subject-verb agreement, and verb tenses all falling under this classification). That is, treatable errors "occur in a patterned, rule-governed way" (Ferris, 1999, p. 6). Contrarily, untreatable errors are not as structured, therefore making it difficult to use symbols or simple annotations to denote the erroneous occurrence, i.e., when students' written word order or expressions use incorrect word choices (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). In short, "There is no handbook or set of rules students can consult to avoid or fix those types of errors" (Ferris, 1999, p. 6). Research in treatable and untreatable errors have revealed a number of interesting findings: Teachers tend to mark 'treatable' errors indirectly and 'untreatable' errors directly (Ferris 2006) and this is probably because they believe that students are unable to self-correct untreatable errors marked indirectly (Ferris 2006). "Moreover, while students seem to be able to improve their language accuracy through feedback on form if they are taught the rules governing directly 'treatable' errors (Ferris 1999), idiosyncratic errors are more amenable to indirect feedback techniques, such as locating the type of error and asking students to correct it themselves (Ferris & Roberts 2001)" (as cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 85).

Indirect and Direct Feedback

Direct feedback is one method that can be used by educators to explicitly annotate errors that exist in L2 composition, and as alluded to earlier, direct feedback helps students become aware of more difficult aspects of the language, such as, untreatable errors. As noted by Hyland and Hyland (2006a), there are a number of studies, which show that direct correction can alleviate grammar and lexical mistakes over time. In other words, lower-level L2 writers can profit from the use of direct feedback, for example, "EFL students who have received formal grammar instruction, . . . might benefit from rule reminders or codes that will jog their memories" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013, p. 287). Furthermore, Ferris (2002) also advocates using direct correction for untreatable errors, because it leads writers to more revisions in subsequent drafts. Nonetheless, educators who give too much direct feedback tend to appropriate learners' essays with their own ideas and give too much negative correction (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013), which can have a demotivating effect on learners' self-confidence (Truscott, 1996, 2007). "[Teachers] can be impersonal, critical and autocratic . . . [but] controlling this representation of self can be crucial to maintaining interaction with students and providing feedback that will be taken seriously" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 208). Consequently, when instructors are giving error correction, they must be careful *how and what* they are concentrating on, as the ultimate goal of L2 writing is building an ongoing dialog with the students. Albeit, if the goal of the educator is to promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning, teachers need to focus on errors that are "global or serious . . . frequent . . . and stigmatizing (more typical of L2 writers than of other students)," (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013, p. 286) slowly weaning learners off of direct correction with the use of less explicit methods.

Indirect feedback is another approach that educators can use to implicitly point out less complicated mistakes made by L2 writers and is noted as an effective method for treatable errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 1999; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). "Most experts agree that indirect feedback clearly has the most potential for helping writers to continue developing their L2 proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013, p. 287). Namely, SLA research supports the idea that it requires metacognitive skills to process less explicit CF, thus making the experience more memorable (2013), and students prefer cues to direct correction as it allows them to correct their own errors (Chandler, 2003; Leki, 1991). "[Hence,] teachers should provide indirect feedback that engages L2 writers in cognitive problem-solving as they attempt to self-edit based upon the feedback that they have received" (Ferris, 2004, p. 60). ESL students and *ear-learners* (higher-level learners with less understanding of grammatical and lexical knowledge in their L2) might have a more instinctive understanding of what sounds right, hence benefiting more from initially receiving less explicit forms of indirect feedback, e.g., using color codes, highlighting erroneous errors or receiving an audio response that gives summative evaluations (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013). However, according to Hyland and Hyland (2006b), "indirectness carries its own problems, especially for learners of low English proficiency [e.g. Japanese EFL students] since they may fail to understand the implied messages" (p. 229); thus, EFL educators should not use indirect questions in written CF as the content can be overlooked or misunderstood. Additionally, as Hyland and Hyland note, students do not value corrections that do not attain to any pedagogical development, which means that using a *coding chart*, rather than simply underlining or highlighting errors, would be more beneficial as teachers could appease the students' preferences while using a more implicit form of CF.

Students' Feedback Preference

Another aspect of error correction that is often overlooked is the importance of students' preference towards corrective feedback (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Although some would argue that the correlation between students' views of CF and how well they appropriate it in self-editing has not been established with empirical data—researchers have found that students expect teachers' feedback and when they do not receive it, they often feel discontent with the writing process (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Furthermore, "Even though teacher commentary influences student revisions, students of different educational levels [and backgrounds] favor varied comments" (Huang, 2009, p. 15). In a research project by Hyland and Hyland (2006b), they discovered that "Most students reported that they found the feedback very useful but many also said they would have liked even more, especially feedback helping them to identify problems and giving them information about academic and disciplinary expectations" (p. 87).

Similarly, an influential study by Ferris and Roberts (2001) reported: "*No student* said that they did not want errors corrected by their teacher. The most popular error correction technique among the questionnaire respondents was for the teacher to mark errors and label them with a code" (p. 177). Other studies have confirmed these findings, suggesting that students tend to prefer indirect feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Leki, 1991). "Aside from the advantages of error correction, research also suggests that students both expect certain types of surface-level and global-level correction, which enhances their writing skills" (Huang, 2009, p. 19); nonetheless, Hyland and Hyland (2006b) maintain that students are taking writing classes for different reasons, and each student population has their own unique characteristics, so it is the instructor's responsibility to make opportunities for the learners to request how they want to be corrected and what they want to be corrected on, since we do not really know what type of feedback they truly value.

Prior CF Research in Japanese EFL

There have been two notable research projects about CF in the Japanese context, which have had influential effects on educators' approaches. Robb et al. (1986) published one of the more surprising research findings about corrective feedback in Japanese EFL where they used 134 students in a year-long longitudinal study to find out if varied forms of feedback had any effect on students' written production. In their study, they used direct, coded, uncoded and marginal feedback in order to correct their students (1986). Overall they found that the students' production did not change dependent on the feedback (direct or indirect) that was given. In the end, they suggested that "While well-intentioned teachers may provide elaborate forms of corrective feedback, time might be more profitably spent in responding to more important aspects of student writing" (p. 91). Although objectives of Robb et al. were well-taken by academia, their study had some inconsistencies: they were not using a drafting method and they did not look at the effects of *no feedback* as a dependent variable.

Another influential research project into CF in Japan was a more recent article written by Ashwell (2000) where he sampled 50 students over a year using a drafting method to determine how students would fare when given feedback on form, form and content, or *no feedback*. By underlining circling and indicating omissions, he focused on several treatable errors; for content feedback, he used marginal and endnotes in order to give formative and summative evaluations to the students (2000). Through his endeavors, Ashwell found that CF, does, in fact, help students develop grammatical accuracy. "He found that when revising their essays, students took into account three-fourths [sic] of the feedback they received on form" (as cited in Russell & Spada, 2006, p. 136), while students tended to dismiss the comments related to their content (Ashwell, 2000). Both of these studies have set a precedent for how CF should be conducted while also suggesting practical approaches for teaching writing in Japanese EFL.

Implications for L2 Writing in Japanese EFL

"Over the past twenty years, changes in writing pedagogy and insights gained from research studies have transformed feedback practices" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 83).

Depending on the learning environment, many theorists have recommended different forms of feedback contingent on the types of errors produced and the proficiency level of the students (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Truscott, 1996), making CF a particularly daunting aspect of teaching L2 composition; however educators in Japanese EFL can make stronger convictions about their approaches when armed with the knowledge of prior research.

Initially, many believed that CF had no influence on how well students did in L2 writing, but now it is obvious that it does have an important effect, especially in the Japanese L2 writing context (Ashwell, 2000). However, many different investigations have shown that the type of CF and feedback on content do not exactly have a substantial impact on L2 writing (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Huang, 2009; Leki, 1990; Robb et al., 1986). “This is good news in that marking errors in this way may be faster and easier for teachers, and, more importantly, it reduces the possibility that instructors themselves will make errors while correcting” (Ferris & Roberts, 2001, p. 177). Hence, educators in Japanese EFL should attempt to use more implicit forms of correction—when possible—and avoid appropriating students content through obsessive comments in the margins (Leki, 1990). “[T]he ultimate aim of any form of feedback should be to move students to a more independent role where they can critically evaluate their own writing and intervene to change their own processes and products where necessary” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 92). Nevertheless, indirect correction can be just as confusing, especially for lower-level students; therefore, “If teachers choose to give students less explicit feedback on their errors, they may need to be prepared to explain and defend this strategy, and perhaps even demonstrate its effectiveness to students by means of a self-editing exercise” (Ferris & Roberts, 2001, p. 178). Overall, whether EFL educators in Japan opt to use underlining, highlighting, or a coding system, the key is to be consistent and methodical in the application and training of the system being exercised.

Though there are actually a number of different standardized systems for giving error correction (many which are created by publishing houses), EFL teachers and institutions in Japan do not usually incorporate them properly into their curricula. If teachers are going to use a system, it needs to be done consistently and at an institutional level if possible. Furthermore, limiting the symbols is as important as training students on the meaning (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). “It is possible that using a consistent system of marking and coding errors throughout a writing class, paired with mini-lessons which build students’ knowledge base about the error types being marked, might yield more long-term growth in student accuracy than simply underlining or highlighting errors” (Ferris & Roberts, 2001, p. 177); thus, a well-structured standardized coding system can work well for L2 students in Japan—maybe even better than for L1 writers—(Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013) since they have spent a decent amount of time learning the grammar rules. However, variation and comprehensive feedback are also important (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b); using rubrics that give students a holistic view of what is progressing in their essays throughout the drafting process is also seen as beneficial (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). As educators move towards less explicit forms of correction, like a color coding or underlining scheme, students are able to translate the implicit cues into metacognitive meaning in a much smoother fashion making the process much more memorable (Ferris, 2002). Furthermore, studies have shown that it is often students preference to receive less explicit feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Leki, 1990, 1991) as it allows them to self-edit and feel that they are in control of the writing process (Chandler, 2003).

Students' preference towards direct and indirect error correction is an under-researched aspect of L2 writing, and there is often a disconnect between what the students want and what the teachers actually use (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). This is often the situation, because "teachers do not give feedback in a vacuum but create a context for their remarks, making use of what they know of the writer to create an interpersonal link and target feedback to their personality and needs" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b, p. 86). However, many believe that a collaboration or agreement about the kind of feedback that the teacher will use, can lead to a more pleasant L2 writing process (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). This means that "if effective interactive feedback procedures are in operation, teachers are then able to observe the effects of their feedback through the improvement in students writing, and in their attitudes toward writing" (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990, p. 176). Thus, EFL teachers in Japan should consider starting their writing courses by finding out what CF their particular students value most by using cover sheets and questionnaires to investigate the intricacies of their particular context, providing successful CF based on their students' actual preferences (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Leki, 1990).

Conclusion

Although the usefulness of correction has been heavily debated, it is apparent from research that some form of direct or indirect feedback plays an important role in the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the L2 writing process. Theorists such as Truscott (1996, 1999), have definitely shown that research is inadequate when it comes to the effects of correction on grammatical features (Ferris, 1999, 2002), however, there is no conclusive evidence that shows students actually excel when error correction is withheld. More research still needs to be done through longitudinal studies to confirm the long-term effects of direct and indirect feedback in L2 composition (Ferris, 2004). For now, teachers need to look at the type of errors and the skills of their L2 writers in order to decide which type of error is most suitable for their particular instance. In the Japanese context, the use of less explicit forms of feedback (e.g. underlining, circling, highlighting and coding) appear to be applicable as research has shown they are less time-consuming to incorporate and help students just as much as direct correction (Ashwell, 2000; Robb et al., 1986). Furthermore, L2 writing teachers in Japan need to work together with fellow faculty members and institutions to establish a consistent method for feedback to enable students to build on their writing skills without having to worry about learning another system of CF each term. Lastly, negotiation is key to a successful L2 writing class, if students are given a choice in the CF they receive, it may also make the process of editing more enjoyable; hence, encouraging them to take a more autonomous role in the drafting process (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Leki, 1990). A great deal of research points to the notion of using direct feedback and indirect feedback in L2 writing (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b; Leki, 1991; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Russell & Spada, 2006; Truscott, 1996, 2007); nevertheless, the aim of all L2 educators in Japan should be to eventually apply less explicit forms of error correction in writing, which requires their EFL students to solve problems and investigate errors on their own; thus, building their metacognitive and composition skills.

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