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The Debate of Written Corrective Feedback: What to Do and Where to Go

Suhartawan Budianto, Nur Mukminatien, and Mohammad Adnan Latief

Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Abstract

This article presents the debate of written direct CF (WCF) stated by the previous studies. Being a controversial issue leads written CF into two different positions: that written CF is plausible for ESL and EFL learners [1–8, 15, 17], (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), [10, 24]. or that it does not contribute significantly for ESL and EFL learners [6, 21]. Through the debate, there are two queries revealed: what to do and where to go. Finally, it can be concluded that an effort to assist learners in improving their accuracy of ESL and EFL writing has to be conducted by a teacher, and CF is one of the alternative techniques among others to make the learning outcome better. Moreover, both local and global aspects are to be checked and treated proportionally meaning the written CF should not only concern local aspects but also global aspects. Later, it would be better to evaluate the long term effect of providing WCF on other occasions (a month or a semester after WCF is given).

Corresponding Author:
 Suhartawan Budianto; email:
 hartawanbudi76@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Many researchers have investigated EFL issues to facilitate English learners to be good at EFL writing due to the fact that EFL writing is difficult for most EFL learners. They are demanded to comprehend not only the form but also the content. Here, the form represented by local aspects which consist of vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics while the content represented by global aspects is regarded as ideas, content, and organization, see [17].

Writing is not only difficult for most people but also for some successful writers [20]. In addition, [22] argues that writing is a strange activity. Definitely, using a foreign language like English in the context of EFL writing is more difficult than writing in L1 for most people where English is not the official language.

For students in English Department, EFL writing is one of compulsory course. To support the academic achievement, a good skill in writing essay is needed by, particularly, those who are involved in higher level of education [19, 22], (Weigle, 2002), [11, 18]. However, many EFL writers in the university level have many problems in the local aspects and global aspects to produce a good essay. Sometimes, they are good at using the local aspects but are poor at using global aspects or vice-versa.

On the part of the teacher, an aspect needs considering is consistency in giving feedback, i.e. CF (CF) to help students overcome their problems with both local and global aspects. Teachers of L2 have to be alert that applying CF won't be very beneficial to students' L2 improvement if it is prepared, planned and implement consistently.

Looking insight EFL writing and error treatment, CF on local and global aspects of writing is certainly plausible. EFL writers are not aware that they have made errors in their writing due to their low proficiency level. This clearly occurs since there are some different local aspects (vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics) but also global aspects (content, and organization) between L1 and a foreign language (English). The query is raised on how the errors have to be corrected. To answer this, it is necessary to examine the previous studies on providing CF in ESL/ EFL writing.

2. Findings and Discussion

Since 1980's CF has been a controversial issue as it contributes positive or negative effects to EFL learners and ESL learners. It leads to a positive effect because it can improve the language gains [1-5, 8, 15-17], (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), [10, 24]. On the other hand, it is not good if it only emphasizes on grammar errors, even though it can be given by selecting some certain types of grammar targets (Truscott, 2001).

Similar studies state that CF does not improve L2 learners' competence. The improvement during revision in the first draft is not guarantee that L2 learner will do the better on the subsequent writing. It is not very fair to focus on error to see the quality of L2 learners' writing, see [6, 21]. Yet, [21] argue that improvements made during revision are not evidence on the effectiveness of correction for improving learners' writing ability.

Moreover, [6] warns us that "a focus purely on errors is misleading as it does not reveal language gains". In [6] reports there are no relations between the second errors and the errors corrected in the first writing made by the learner. It is concluded that the effect of correction on subsequent writing is not proved since the errors in the second draft are not related to the errors corrected in the first draft.

Written CF (WCF) examining the effectiveness, fluency and accuracy on L2 learners' writing have been carried out [1-5, 8, 15-17], (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), [10, 24]. The previous studies also report that by having WCF, L2 learners not only gain the accuracy on one writing occasion but they can keep the accuracy on the other similar occasion (Beuningen et al., 2013), [1, 2, 4, 5].

Types of CF such as selective error correction (Truscott, 2001), errors underlined CF, uncoded CF [21], and oral form-focused instruction [2] have been investigated in study of L2 writing.

Some CFs such as direct CF, meta-linguistic CF, and oral form-focused instruction CF have been used in study of L2 writing [6, 8], (Beuningen, 2012; Bitchener et. al., 2005),

[2, 5] while indirect CF has been also applied in L2 writing. [5], (Beuningen, 2012; Ferris et. al., 2013).

It does not matter what level of proficiency, CF is beneficial not only for the high proficiency L2 learners but also for low proficiency L2 learners in their writing [6, 8], (Beuningen, 2012), [1, 2, 5], (Ferris et. al., 2013).

Investigating grammatical and lexical errors, [8] found that the direct CF on direct correction and simple underlining of errors are significantly superior to describing the type of error. Direct correction is best for producing accurate revisions, and students prefer it because it is the fastest and easiest way for them as well as the fastest way for teachers over several drafts. Then, [8] concludes that students feel that they learn more from self-correction, and simple underlining of errors takes less teacher time on the first draft.

Teachers think that CF is very important to improve L2 learners' competence and students suggest that they need not only CF but also more comments from the teachers about their writing, see [15, 17], (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), [10, 24].

Other studies examine students' response and teachers' beliefs of WCF. It is revealed that teachers' beliefs are very prominent in conducting WCF [15]. However, there are still some gaps between teachers' beliefs and written feedback practice. For example, teachers mark errors comprehensively although selective marking is preferred, see [15].

Furthermore, teachers' self-assessment and students' perception about WCF can't be separated. The relationship between teachers' self-assessment and student perceptions of teacher-written feedback is very strong [17]. The problem is that most teachers are not totally aware of local and global issues [14, 17]. In short, many people focus to give CF on local aspects (language use, vocabulary, and mechanic) while global aspects (content and organization) do not get much attention.

The role of CF is not only prominent in determining whether someone passes the writing course or not, but also in contributing to the learners language gains. Without a concern to the role CF given by the teachers or lecturers, the function of CF is only used to pass writing examination. In investigating the role of CF in writing thesis, [13] remind the crucial role of feedback in postgraduate thesis examination practice. [13] state that "without feedback, there is no little impetus for the candidate to progress, to close the gap between current and desired performance, and to attain the level needed to become a member of the scholarly community".

Relating to selecting error categories, some studies use focused CF; simple past tense and the definite article [1, 2, 5]. It is called focused WCF because there is only one or two linguistic features investigated. Unfocused WCF, on the other hand, is applied by [8] in which there is twenty three types of errors (see Table 2.4 Error Category). L2 writing teachers should be alert what linguistic features that are more treatable but less teachable (Xu, 2009) since there will be more effective to give the CF which relate

L2 learners' prior knowledge. For example, giving CF on the use of articles in writing for elementary students is less teachable. This is done to ensure the effectiveness of WCF which contribute the language gains for L2 learners.

Selecting errors category usually relies on the characteristics of participants indicating the L1 and L2 owned by participants. The participants from the previous studies may come from the same L1 background [6, 15] or different L1 background [1-5, 8, 10], (Ferris et al., 2013). The participants from the same L1 background generally make the same error categories e.g. the use of tenses, article, countable and uncountable nouns, etc. Therefore, the researcher could determine what error categories should be provided by WCF. On the other hand, having participants from the different L1 background needs some consideration because of the varied of L1 background.

As proposed by [9], there are two important components of doing written CF: (1) strategies, and (2) students' responses. Strategies deal with direct, indirect or meta-linguistic feedback while students' responses relate to revision required, and attention to correction only required. However, it is worth noting that there is no ideal method in executing CF (There is a weakness and strength of any WCF). In this regard, [12] states that there is no CF recipe. In addition, he also argues that the success of conducting CF relies on classroom situation, kinds of error learners produce, levels of proficiency, kind of writing, and accumulation of other unknown variable. CF would be more valuable if there is an improvement in both language fluency and accuracy.

3. Conclusions and Suggestions

Due to its becoming the controversial issue, finding conflicting results, and raising different point of views, WCF emerges as a challenging and relevant topic to discuss in ESL writing. Accordingly, there are still few gaps which must be investigated to come to the conclusive proposition. It is believed that the main goal of CF is to improve students' quality of EFL writing for future achievement or long-term effect even though some studies only have investigated the short-term effect.

However, it is not wise to allow learners make error in L2 and EFL writing without any strategies to help them. EFL writers commonly make errors, but allowing the students to make errors is something weird for a teacher. Abandoning to give error correction is not a wise solution, but finding the way to correct the errors is the most relevant issue.

In short, those previous studies showing the significant effect of WCF can be classified into three different targets of using WCF; 1) examining the accuracy, 2) investigating the teachers' and students' perception, and 3) the other aspects of writing. Most of the previous studies focus on the local aspects (linguistic accuracy) as the target of providing WCF while global aspect have not been investigated a lot.

Assisting learners to improve their accuracy of L2 writing has to be conducted by a teacher, and CF is one of the alternative techniques among others to make the learning outcome better. What is to remember is that CF helps ESL/EFL learners to improve L2 writing quality since CF is not only giving learners the correct local aspects but it also expects the learners to use the appropriate global aspects.

It is definitely believed that the debate between two contradictory ideas "To correct or not to correct" arrives to the more appropriate statement saying what to correct and how to correct" [12]. The first answer is both the local and global aspects are to be corrected. The second answer is the local and global aspects must be treated proportionally, meaning the written CF not only concerns with local aspects but also with global aspects as well. In local aspects, a teacher selects the errors (the use of articles, verb tense, spelling etc) that will be corrected because it will be very hard for the teachers to correct every error in L2 writing. Moreover, L2 learners will be very frustrated because there are many errors shown by their teachers. The teachers spend much time only for correcting errors they do not consider the improvement of other aspects of L2 writing such as content and organization. Consequently, selecting error that will be corrected is needed to give teachers time to consider the other aspects in EFL writing (content and organization).

The effectiveness of providing CF might be seen from the sustainability of how long the study is conducted and how long the ESL/EFL learners can retain the writing quality after CF given. In short, the length of WCF studies is very varied based on the consideration of investigating the effect; short or long term effect. One interesting goal from the previous study is that how long learners can keep the linguistic targeted if experimental study is used. In experimental study, the short term effect as objective is more appropriate than long term effect. The effect will be seen directly after the treatment (WCF). Later, it would be better to evaluate long term effect of providing WCF on other occasions (a month, semester after WCF given). The effect of WCF might be seen directly after WCF is given on subsequent student writing. Further, the effect of WCF might also be seen overtime in the future (e.g. in the end of the semester or in the end of the year) after CF is given. The effects of learning outcome are more popular with so-called "short-term effect" and "long-term effect".

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