THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRAMMAR CORRECTION TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING

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Abstract

There has been a hot debate concerning the effectiveness of feedback provision especially grammatical feedbacks in second language writing. The proponents of feedback provision argue that it can help students recognize their linguistic shortcomings. If a teacher points out to a student a grammatical error he has made, and provides -indirectly or directly- the correct form, the student will then understand the mistake he has made, learn from it, and his ability to write accurately will improve. The opponents, on the other side, argue that the practice is ineffective and harmful and that it should be abandoned. It make no difference who the students are, how many mistakes are corrected, which mistakes are corrected, how detailed the comments are, or in what form they are presented, the corrections have no effect. This research was aimed at finding out the effectiveness of feedback from the perspective of the students and the pre and post writing tasks. Forty students participated as respondents. They were the students of **Writing 4** course at College of Language of Sultan Agung Islamic University. The participants in the research wrote essays and the teacher provided feedbacks for the grammatical errors found in the essays. At the end of the experiment, questionnaire of Likert-scale type inquiring their perception about the provision grammatical feedbacks were distributed. The data were analyzed descriptively. Their pre and post task writing scores were also compared statistically.

Keywords: *grammatical feedback, effective, second language writing*

INTRODUCTION

Though responding to students' writing as providing feedbacks certainly is a very tiring and a time-consuming task (Kroll in Celce-Murcia, 2001), many writing teachers keep doing it since they believe that it is essential to help the students recognize their linguistic shortcomings (Ferris, 2003). The argument in support for this is the belief that if a teacher points out to a student a grammatical error he has made, and provides, indirectly or directly, the correct form, the student will then understand the mistake he has made, learn from it, and his ability to write accurately will improve. It is also widely felt that if teachers do not correct their students' grammatical mistakes, 'fossilization' will occur, and it will become very difficult to later eliminate these errors (Gray, 2004).

The continuing practice of error correction is also based on the argument that writing -as Seow (Richards & Renandya: 2002), Harmer (2004 & 2007)- involves 4 stages, namely planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Teachers' feedback – together with peers' – is important input for students to improve their writing. At this revising stage, students usually look back at what they

have put on papers and see whether they have communicated their ideas effectively to the readers. Comments, corrections and the like from readers represented by the teachers and peers will be very helpful in completing a good writing work.

In writing, revision is necessary because of at least two reasons. First, unlike oral communication, writing tasks do not allow for an ongoing negotiation of meaning through interlocution. Therefore, the intended meaning must be expressed accurately to the readers. Second, the written medium is often reserved by society when important ideas need to be formalized, standardized or made more permanent. Thus, formal writing carries with it certain expectations of clarity, precision, quality and durability.

It is, therefore, very often we see writing teachers are very busy struggling with piles of students' papers both at school and at home. They read, review, and provide correction and comments with their red pens till late at night. These activities will, consequently, reduce their time for preparing and developing the courses due to the following day since they are too much occupied with activities of locating errors and providing correction. Failing to prepare and develop the course makes writing teachers –when they are in the classroom for teaching writing- simply refer to the work that the students did previously, point out and elaborate the so many grammatical mistakes and errors, and the corrections for them. Other aspects of writing as content development, flows of ideas, logics and styles will likely be neglected.

However, the hard work and sweat of writing teachers in finding errors and providing correction on students' writing, sometimes doesn't work as it is supposed to be since students do not really learn from it. My personal experience as a writing teacher confirms that very often the corrected papers completed with the appropriate linguistic version just go to garbage bin as waste. What the teacher expects to happen doesn't always come true. The corrected errors appear again and again in students' writing.

It is not surprising, then, when Truscott (1996) claimed that grammar correction should be eliminated from L2 writing classes. He argued that the provision of corrective feedback on ESL student writing was ineffective and harmful, and that it should, therefore, be abandoned. He maintained that there was no empirical evidence to show that the practice was worth continuing. In his study Truscott reviewed previous work as from Knoblauch and Brannon (1981), Hillocks (1986), Krashen (1984) and Leki (1990) which found that correction had little or no effect on students' writing ability. It made no difference who the students were, how many mistakes were corrected, which mistakes were corrected, how detailed the comments were, or in what form they were presented, the corrections had no effect.

In response to Truscott, Ferris (1999) argued that the research base Truscott was drawing upon was too limited and conflicting in its finding. Truscott may have been a bit hasty in his

conclusions and that error correction has helped some students in limited contexts. Ultimately, Ferris and Truscott agreed that further research was needed to help them better understand some of the potential effects of error correction on L2 writing. They suggested that studies should examine whether particular approaches to corrective feedback lead to greater accuracy and whether such approaches will result in greater performance with certain grammatical forms than others (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1999).

Rather than simply agreeing to the proposition advocated by Truscott that grammar correction has no effect on students' writing, or the one advocated by Ferris that grammar correction works, this paper will present a research finding on the effectiveness of grammar correction in improving students' writing by looking at the students' perception on the issue of the effectiveness of the grammar correction, and evaluation of students' essays taken before and after the grammar corrections were provided. This is aimed at enriching the discussion and perspectives on the issue at hand.

REVIEWS OF RELATED LITERATURE
The Development of ESL Writing Approach

Only after 1960, did writing find its significant place in ESL classes because many foreign students came to study at American universities and needed to write in English for academic purposes. The methods still focused largely on grammatical perfection and were highly controlled (Leki, 1992). Exercises in writing became focused on imitating English paragraph or essay form by copying or making changes to an existing text. The period which was later called as the beginning of the form-based writing focused very much on grammar accuracy and mechanics, with feedbacks given by the teacher (Reid, 1993).

By 1976, pattern/product approach came to replace form-based approach. At that time, it was felt that the latter approach failed to prepare students to do writing exam given in universities (Reid, 1993). Different from form-based approach, pattern/product approach focused on the concepts of thesis statement, topic sentences, paragraph unity, organization strategies, and the development of paragraphs by following different patterns of writing. Form and structure were still important, but the importance of using more original ideas in writing was starting to unfold. Feedback was given more on content and organization.

In 1980s, the pattern/product approach developed to process approach in which the goal of writing instruction was more on communication rather than grammatical accuracy (Leki, 1992). Students became the creators of text rather than just mimicking or manipulating a form or pattern presented to them. Classroom strategies included journaling, peer collaboration, invention,

revision, and attention to content before form Ideas, expression, discovery, and organization became the focus.

In the late 1980s, the process approach to ESL writing was criticized for focusing too much on the personal experience of writing, for giving the impression that accuracy was not important, and for not preparing language learners for single-draft essay exams (Leki, 1992). Therefore, teachers and researchers began to focus on aligning teaching toward content of specific fields and the requirements of writing in those fields with a specific audience in mind. English language instruction became linked to other courses through team-teaching (Raimes, 1991). Error correction and grammatical accuracy in writing became a focus again because academic writing requires accuracy as well as fluency. However, the process approach was not abandoned altogether but integrated into academic writing tasks (Reid, 1993).

In the 1990s, writing trends and research focused on composing and revising processes, contrastive analysis/error analysis, coherence/cohesion, the process-product classroom, communicative competence, collaborative learning, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and proficiency testing (Reid, 1993). Teaching writing to advanced ELLs became a particular focus (Reid, 1993). These methods and trends were in contrast to earlier methods.

The Writing Process

Writing is a process with 4 stages namely planning, drafting, revising and editing (Seow; 2002), or planning, drafting, editing and final draft (Harmer; 2004). Planning which is also sometimes called as pre-writing is the stage where writing learners are encouraged to write by jotting ideas and collecting information necessary as through brainstorming, clustering, making WH-questions and the like. When planning, writers have to think about three main issues (Harmer, 2004). In the first place they have to consider the purpose of their writing since this will influence not only the type of text they wish to produce, but also the language they use, and the information they choose to include. Secondly, writers have to think of the audience they are writing for, since this will influence not only the shape of the writing but also the choice of language –whether it is formal or informal in tone for example. Thirdly, writers have to consider the content structure of the piece – that is how best to sequence the facts, ideas or arguments which they have decided to include.

Drafting is the stage where writer puts ideas and information he wishes to share on paper. This is usually done on the assumption that it will be amended later. The focus is usually more on the fluency of ideas rather than the accuracy of grammar and spelling.

The next stage is revising (Seow) or editing (Harmer). Seow suggests that revising occurs when writer looks back at his / her work by putting feedbacks from both teachers and peers into consideration. The writer will also measure the effectiveness of his / her communication to the

audience he / she is targeting. Harmer also suggests that what he means by editing is reflecting and revising.

The last stage is editing (Seow) or Final version (Harmer) in which the writer produces the final version. Checking grammar and spelling accuracies, punctuations, and word choices usually becomes the main task to be done at this stage.

Though there are four stages but as a matter of fact writing process is not linear, but rather recursive in the sense that a writer plans, drafts, edits / revises and then re-plans, re-drafts, re-edits before finally has the final work. Seow describes this process from Process Activated to Process terminated, while Harmer describes it as the Process Wheel, as the following:
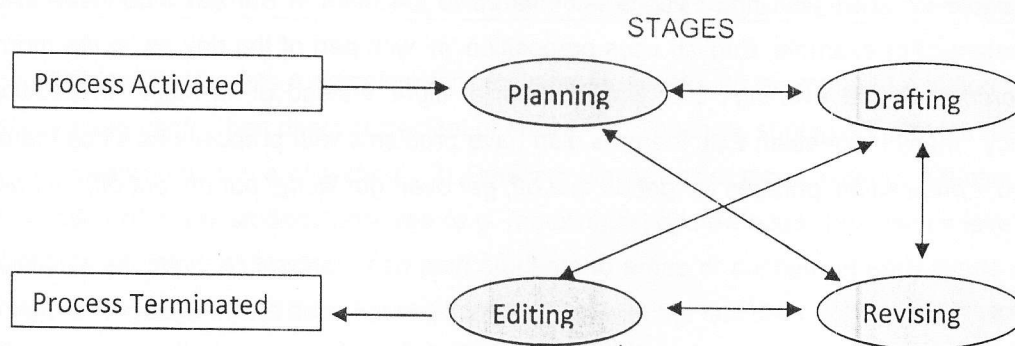

Figure 1
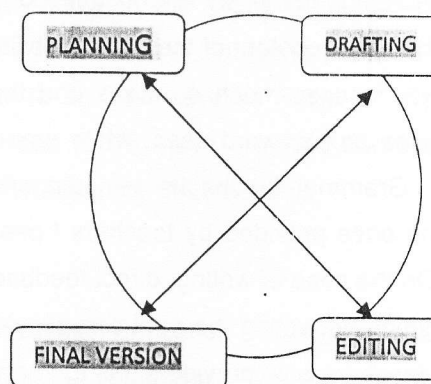The Writing Process
(Anthony Seow in Richard & Renandya, 2002)

Figure 2
The Process Wheel (Harmer, 2004)

Grammatical Error

Errors are defined as "morphological, syntactical, and lexical deviations from the grammatical rules of language that violate the intuitions of native speakers (Hedgcock, 2005).

Errors in second language writing are part of learning, and research on ESL errors has found that they are not random, but are regular and rule-governed (Reid, 1993). Types of errors learners have in their second language may depend on the structure of their L1 and their previous learning experiences of the English language (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). L2 writers' grammatical errors tend to be different from native speakers' errors, for they have distinct problems with verbs (tenses, modals, passive construction, infinitives, conditionals), subject/verb agreement, nouns (types, plurals, possessives, articles), prepositions, and sometimes spelling (Holt, 1997).

In his study, Bitchener, et al. (2005) reported that grammatical error that occurred very frequently in the writing of ESL learners is the use of preposition. In the context of ESL in Indonesia, the learners' difficulty in dealing with appropriate usage of English preposition is understandable since English prepositions —compared to the ones in Bahasa Indonesia- are not very consistent. For example, English uses preposition '*in*' with part of the day as '*in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening*', but English has '*at night*' instead of '*in night*'. In addition to 'consistency', many Indonesian ESL learners also have problems with prepositions since there are many '*verb + preposition*' phrases as '*get on, get off, get over, get along, put on, put off, put away*,' etc.

Feedbacks

Feedback is any procedure used by teachers to inform learners whether an instructional response is right or wrong (Kulhavy, 1997), or any inputs from readers to the writer that provide information (Keh; 1990), or just *response* (Reid 1993). Teacher's feedback on student writing is a significant issue related to language errors in writing (Frodesen in Celce-Murcia; 2002).

Feedback can be about content of the writing, stylistics, grammar or the combination of the three. Content feedback focuses much on ideas and the organization of ideas on the writing, stylistics feedback focuses on the word uses, while grammar feedback focuses on grammatical aspects of the writing. Grammar feedbacks are categorized into direct and indirect feedbacks. Direct feedbacks are the ones provided by teachers / peers directly to the learners either in oral form or in written one. On the case of writing, direct feedbacks are usually given by the teachers by crossing the wrong version and writing the right one somewhere on the students' paper. While for indirect feedbacks, the teachers only provide signs to show that certain phrases are inappropriate, as putting a check in the margin of the lines where errors occur, underlining or highlighting selected errors, coding errors either in the margins or above selected errors with symbols such as *vt* for verb tense, *wf* for word form, *art* for article and so on, attaching a sheet to the writer's draft with a list of several structural errors along with exercises or handouts to help writer better understand the grammatical system or feature involved.

Table 1: Examples of Direct and Indirect Grammatical Feedbacks

Inappropriate sentences	Direct Feedbacks	Indirect Feedback
Suddenly Vika loud laughed and it made her family shocked.	*Suddenly Vika loudly laughed and it made her family shocked.*	*Suddenly Vika loudx laughed and it made her family shocked.*
She remembers about her embarrass experience	*She remembers about her embarrassing experience.*	*She remembers about her embarrass experience.*
She bought CD	*She bought a CD*	*She bought ___ CD*
He went to the store buy some books and drove home.	*He went to the store, buy some books, and drove home.*	*He went to the store / buy some books / and drove home*

Fordesen suggests a guideline for providing feedbacks on grammar: 1) indirect feedback is usually more useful than direct correction of errors; 2) Teachers should not provide feedback on all errors in any one piece of writing; 3) Deciding which errors most deserve attention requires consideration of many student variables (e.g. metalinguistic knowledge, proficiency level) and the instructional situation; 4) teachers can alert students to areas of concern in early drafts so that all attention to language errors does not need to be given with the last draft.

Although providing feedbacks in student writing is a common practice, it is often described in negative terms (Lee, 2009) as frustrating, grueling and anxiety ridden, tedious and unrewarding. Even in 1996, Truscott recommended that this practice should be abandoned.

Several years later, the debate between the proponents and opponents of corrective feedback still continues. In fact, since the publication of Truscott's review article, a number of other studies have found corrective feedback to be ineffective as Fazio (2001), Polio, Fleck, & Leder (1998). Nevertheless, Bitchener and Knoch (2008) have provided some evidence that corrective feedback can be effective in improving the accuracy of L2 writers.

METHOD

Participants

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of College of Languages of Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA) Semarang. The subjects of the research were two groups of students of semester 4 who were taking *Writing IV* course. They were group E2 and group E3. There were 24 students in Group E2, and 25 students in Group E3. The selection of Groups E2 and E3 to be participants of the research was simply by convenient sake, that the researcher was the *Writing* teacher of them.

Each member of both groups has completed the courses of *Writing 1, Writing 2* and *Writing 3*. Writing 4 is Genre-Based Writing. (At the same time, the participants were also taking Grammar 4 course). Though the participants completed the previous Writing courses with different grades, but the researcher assumed that they have almost the same level of proficiency in Writing and grammar.

At the end of the experiment, some students were excluded from being participants of the research because they either did not attend all classes conducted or did not collect all the writing tasks required. Finally it was decided that 20 participants from E2 and and 20 participants from E3 were the subjects for the analysis.

Targeted Grammar Error

In this research, there was no specific targeted grammar error. All the grammatical errors found on the student writing were subject to correction. Though those could be a problem concerning the conclusiveness of the finding (Bitchener and Knoch, 2009), the researcher think it didn't really matter since at the end of the experiment, student scores were based on overall performance rather than on a very specific grammar problem.

Instrument

Besides the writing tasks, a questionnaire was administered to the participants. It consisted of 2 parts. Part 1 was directed to find information about the participants as name, semester, and sex. Part 2 was directed to collect information on the participants' perception about grammar for writing and their reactions to feedbacks provided by their teachers.

Part 2 of the questionnaire consisted of statements which required responses in 5-items Likert Scale type with *1) Strongly Disagree; 2) Disagree; 3) Undecided; 4) Agree; and 5) Strongly Agree.* There are 6 statements in Part 2. They are *1) When writing, I do not think about my grammar; 2) When writing, grammar is not a problem for me; 3) I've never reread my writing tasks which were returned by my teacher; 4) I always check the grammar feedbacks I find on my writing tasks; 5) Teacher's feedback improves my grammar; 6) I save my writing work which has been corrected by my teacher.*

Procedure

The procedures of the research were administered according to the following schedule:

Week	Activity / Treatment
Week 1	Pre research activity: the research design, procedures, etc. were informed to the participants both from CG and TG. The participants wrote essays of 250 – 300 words individually. These essays served as the Pre-Task writing.
Week 2	Task 1: Writing a recount text (250 – 300 words) Day 1: Respondents wrote the tasks and collected them (out of classroom session)

	Day 2&3: The tasks were corrected, feedbacks were provided.
	Day 4: The tasks were returned to the participants.
Week 3	Task 2: Writing a narrative text (250 – 300 words)
Week 4	Task 3: Writing a procedure text (250 – 300 words)
Week 5	Task 4: Writing a descriptive text (250 – 300 words)
Week 6	Post Task: Participants were required to write a descriptive text in 250 - 300 words.

Notes: 1) The treatment of Task 2 to Task 5 is the same as the treatment in Task 1.
     2) Pre Task and Post task were rated by 3 different raters.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Grammar in Writing

When participants were asked to comment on the statement "*When writing, I do not think about my grammar*", most participants declined the statement with *Strongly Disagree* (25%) and *Disagree* (50%). It means that they do consider grammar accuracy when they are doing writing.

When they were required to respond to the statement "*When writing, grammar is not a problem for me*", it is found that the majority of the participants stated that grammar was a problem; 12.5% responded by *Strongly Disagree* and 50% responded by *Disagree*. While there were only 27.5% of participants responded *Agree* and 2.5% responded *Strongly Agree*. The responses of these two statements clearly show that when doing writing students are careful about their language accuracy but at the same time grammar accuracy is a problem for them. This condition possibly hampers their writing process. Because of this, they couldn't develop fluency. Too much time was spent to deal with grammar.

Table 1
Students' Perception about Grammar and Writing

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Un-decided (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
When writing, I do not think about my grammar	25	52.5	12.5	10	0
When writing, grammar is not a problem for me	12.5	50	7.5	27.5	2.5

Grammar Feedbacks

Does returning the already-corrected-writing work help students? The study revealed that majority of the participants reread the writing tasks which were returned to them. Responding to the statement "*I've never reread my writing tasks which were returned by my teacher*", the majority of the respondents had disagreement; 15% participants declined the statement by *Strongly Disagree* and 55% declined it by having *Disagree*. Only 15% approved the statement by *Agree*. We may assume that reading is a part of the learning process. When students reread their writing work

which has been corrected by their teachers, there is a possibility that they learn from their own work and feedback. From this argument, we see that there is an advantage of providing feedback to the students. Feedbacks may be useful.

Concerning whether providing written feedback on writing tasks is worth doing, these two statements will help determine the answer. Responding to the statement "*I always check the grammar feedbacks I find on my writing tasks*", 85% participants of both group said *Agree* and *Strongly Agree*. The rests 15% of the participants went to *Disagree* (5%) and *Undecided* (10%). For the statement "*Teacher's feedback improves my grammar*", 95% of the participants were in favor of it by choosing *Agree* (65%) and *Strongly Agree* (30%). There were only 2.5% of the participants who had *Undecided* and the other 2.5% went to *Disagree*. The responses to the three statements clearly show that providing feedbacks, especially grammar correction, is worth doing because the feedbacks may encourage learning and possibly improve students' grammar.

This research also shows that –though it was mentioned in the previous part of this paper that teachers may feel discouraged to return students' work since many students will only throw them away to the garbage bin, the majority of participants will save the work with them. Responding to statement "*I save my writing works which were returned by my teacher*", 65% of the participants had *Agree*, and 27.5% had *Strongly Agree*. Though sometimes, we –English teachers- see students' writing work on the garbage bin, this research finds out that it was not a common practice.

Table 2
Students' Perception about the Usefulness of feedback

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Un-decided (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
I've never reread my writing tasks which were returned by my teacher	15	55	15	15	0
I always check the grammar feedbacks I find on my writing tasks	0	5	10	65	20
Teacher's feedback improves my grammar	0	2.5	2.5	65	30
I save my writing works which were returned by my teacher.	0	5	2.5	65	27.5

Statistical Analysis

The effectiveness of feedback provision was also measured by the participants' writing scores on the Pre-task and the post task writing. The essays for both tasks were rated by three different raters. Before doing their jobs, the raters were informed that grammar was the most important factor in deciding the scores. Stylistics problems as paragraphing, punctuation, generic structures etc. –though they might affect their judgment- were not the main consideration. The

scores were decided to be between 60 (the lowest) to 90 (the highest). The scores of the three raters were then averaged. The averaged score of pre Task and the averaged score of post Task consecutively served served as the pre Task and post Task scores for analyses.

The two sets of scores then were analyzed statistically using SPSS 16.0. The result shows that the significance of the difference is 0.130. It means that though the two means of pre task and post task are different (77.0275 and 78.8575), the difference is not significant. Grammar corrections which were given during the process of the experiment didn't bring significant effect on the improvement of students' writing. This finding is different from the perception of the students. As mentioned previously, based on the questionnaire it was found that the majority of the respondents approved the statement that teacher's feedback improves their grammar.

Why this difference happens? There are two possible reasons that may account for this. The first, the treatment –in this case the treatment of grammar feedback provision- was done in a relatively very short period. It was only in 6 weeks with 4 writing tasks (and consequently 4 times feedback provision). The effect of the feedback was not strong enough to influence the habit of using the right grammar. Besides, the feedbacks that the participants had had on their previous tasks might not be the same as the grammar problems that occurred on the post task.

Secondly, the corrective grammar feedback provided was unfocused in the sense that all grammar mistakes were corrected. Bitchener and Knoch (2009) suggest that the unfocused approach –with too many grammar items corrected- fails to produce a conclusive answer to the question of feedback efficacy.

Table 3
Statistical Output of T-Test

Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre_post	Pre_test	40	77.0275	5.39439	85293
	post_test	40	78.8575	5.30853	83935

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre_post	Equal variances assumed	.404	.527	-1.529	78	.130	-1.83000	1.19666	-4.21237	.55237
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.529	77.980	.130	-1.83000	1.19666	-4.21238	.55238

CONCLUSION

Following the analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the students believed that they do consider grammar when doing writing and for majority of them grammar is still a problem. Secondly, students perceived that grammatical feedbacks in writing are useful for them. They read and check the feedbacks provided by their teachers. In this way, students learn from the mistakes. However, the study of pre-task and post-task writing suggests that there is no significant difference in students' grammar performance before and after the feedbacks were provided. The effect of feedbacks provision was not proven to be effective in improving grammar in students' writing. This ineffectiveness may result from the fact that the experiment was conducted in a relatively short period. The second problem may concern about the focus of the feedbacks under study.

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