

## The Role of Teacher-Student Conferencing in Improving Grammatical Accuracy in University EFL Students' Composition Writing

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### Abstract

Based on the value of teacher-student conferencing practice in writing classes, the study investigates the role of this practice in improving grammatical accuracy in EFL university students' writing. One particular aim of this study is to help second-year students at Sétif 2 University (Algeria) reduce subject-verb (S-V) disagreement and run-ons in their writing. Ten students took part in this study; they wrote 120 drafts, and were provided with teacher's oral feedback on their written compositions at the editing stage. Corpora of students' compositions were examined and instances of errors were counted before each conferencing session for four weeks. The findings reveal that the participants successfully show progress in grammatical accuracy over time to reach elimination for Subject-Verb disagreements and a significant reduction for run-ons.

**Keywords:** accuracy, feedback, grammar correction, teacher-student conferencing, writing

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## Introduction

Teaching writing is one of the most difficult tasks for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers as it involves various processes which require teachers to devote a lot of time to help students write better. It is what and how we respond to students' texts that carry the most weight in writing instruction. In fact, although there is no one right way to respond to students' writing, there are some better ways to respond as there are worse. On the one hand, most studies on feedback on second language (L2) writing show that students receiving comments from teachers improve their writing over time and recent research reflects that content takes the priority over form when providing feedback. Writing accuracy, on the other hand, is the key to readability and transmission of the writer's intended message.

## Statement of the Problem

Being university-level EFL writing teachers for a considerable period of time authorizes us to say that the level of student writers is developing slightly and their productions have become more satisfying than they have been and this is due to many changes in the Algerian University such as the teaching approach which has been adopted by writing teachers changing from a product approach to a process approach. Also, the allocated time to teaching writing has been increased from three hours per week to four hours and a half allowing further practice opportunities for the students.

Increased teaching and feedback provision enable students to become familiar with expository writing including different types of paragraphs and compositions. What is noticed is that students go beyond the problems they mostly complain about like the difficulty to start writing and generate ideas; this is thanks to the instruction of pre-writing techniques. Students also become able to write for a purpose and an audience, developing major and minor details leading all to a good content and structure. It is satisfying for any writing teacher to see his/her students achieving this; however, it is very disappointing to read such a good content with accuracy errors especially when the error is far expected to be produced by university students. Accuracy errors harm the good content and affect the overall quality of the writing piece, and hence affect the reader's understanding. "Even fairly minor errors can lead to problems in text processing and comprehension" (Ferris, 2002: p.329)

Accuracy problems reflect unsuccessful editing and much of the existing literature on writing instruction is about the writing process and its sub-processes, but when we come to editing, two terms are common: self-editing and peer-editing. If our students are noticeably developing through process writing instruction, but producing inaccurate products with many errors, this means that there is a gap somewhere. This might lead us to assume that either self /peer editing are not done properly, or the students undermine the editing process; therefore, a necessary intervention from the teacher at this stage is necessary. The most suitable intervention, we see, that can work with both assumptions is teacher-student conferencing. To illustrate, one of the claims of the process writing approach is that conferencing should take place between the first draft and revision, but since self / peer editing are two strategies that did not put an end to students' errors, why do not we try conferencing at that stage to allow more individualized treatment of students' problems? Also, if the students undermine the editing process, then they

need to be convinced of the necessity of developing editing skills and teacher-student conferences can be a good way to do so.

Among the accuracy problems that are noticed in second year EFL students' writing, two grammatical problems frequently appear: subject-verb disagreement and run-ons. Grammar correction is seen as one way of helping writers to improve the accuracy of a piece of writing and in turn, therefore, to improve its communicative effectiveness. Subject-verb(S-V) disagreement is an error that is not expected at a university level, and it is not the case of one or two students, but of a wide majority. Despite the teachers' repeated corrections of such errors, the students undermine their corrections and ignore their effect on their writing. This might be justified in Ferris'(2002) words: "Many students have little interest in and pay limited attention to editing their work. They find editing tedious or unimportant or they have become overly dependent on teachers or tutors to correct their work for them"(p.329). Subject-Verb disagreement and run-ons do not only occur at the second-year level, but they extend to Master level and this reflects that the types of feedback followed in their second and third year writing sessions fail to have long-term effects . There is then a call to an urgent solution to this problem at earlier levels.

### **Aim of the study**

This research paper comes in an attempt to help university-level EFL students to *eradicate* or *reduce* silly errors in their writing which are of shame to appear at this high level . Also, it aims at leading our students to be autonomous editors who can succeed beyond the second-year EFL writing class.

### **Research Hypotheses**

To reach our aim we raised the following hypotheses:

1. Teacher-student conferencing can be an effective way to achieve grammatical accuracy in university-level EFL students' composition writing.
2. Teacher-student conferencing can reduce or eradicate subject-verb agreement problems in university-level EFL students' composition writing.
3. Teacher-student conferencing can reduce or eradicate run-ons in university-level EFL students' composition writing.

### **Background of the Study**

Feedback, a major element in language teaching, is "an input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision...the comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives a writer to produce reader-based prose as opposed to writer-based prose" (Keh,1990, p.294). Students do not become proficient writers only by writing and rewriting for readable hand writing, but they need to see how readers receive their writing and what revisions might strengthen their texts. Having an audience is the first step that encourages the writer to consider issues of language, style, tone, unity and coherence and conferencing allows the presence of a reader.

### **Writing Conferences**

Conferencing is a form of oral teacher feedback. According to Penafiora (2002), conferencing is "one-to-one conversation between teacher and student" (p.351). It is an effective

means of teacher response to student writing and it “may be short or for as long as the two parties wish to talk” (p.352). In their investigation of feedback in L2 writing, Hyland and Hyland (2006) claim that the writing conference is “an approach lauded by L1 researchers as a dialogue in which meaning and interpretation are constantly being negotiated by participants and as a method that provides both teaching and learning benefits”(p.5). Defined this way, conferencing appears to be a new area of application in L2 context and the little research done proves its positive effect on students’ writing.

Conferencing has been proved to be an effective means of teacher response to student writing because it makes teachers better acquainted with their students (Penaflorida,2002). Writing conferences also make discussion more ‘student-centered’, foster a sense of community, a sense of group knowledge, and student participation (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The interactive nature of the conference gives teachers a chance to meet students’ writing needs and clarify ambiguities. In the context of the present study, the ‘subject-verb agreement’ and ‘run-ons’ are both identified as students’ needs.

### **Grammar Correction and Accuracy**

Grammar correction is a kind of corrective feedback. The latter is given on form consisting of the marks used by the teacher to correct error on grammatical features, capitalizations, punctuations, tenses, and other surface structures. It is claimed that “the object of using correction techniques is to give the students a chance to get the new language right” (Harmer,1983: p.63). In grammar correction, the focus is given to correcting grammatical errors in order to reach an accurate product. Grammatical errors include sentence structure, agreement, tense, word order, fragments and parts of speech.

Corrective feedback is of two types: implicit and explicit feedback. Implicit corrective feedback is favored over explicit feedback in which “people learn more by doing things themselves rather than being told about them” (Scrivener,2005: p.3). By contrast, explicit correction should not be ignored as it “may be the quickest, most appropriate, most useful way of helping” (p.301). However, emphasis is put on the importance of ‘encouraging, tactful correction’ and the need for sensitivity on the part of the teacher (Ur,1996: p.249). Confirming this, some researchers like Erlam, Ellis & Bastone (2013) advise teachers to try to elicit self-correction from the learner rather than to correct directly and explicitly.

In contrast to benefits of corrective feedback, explicit correction is considered potentially damaging as it might elicit a negative affective response from the learner (Truscott,1999).Further, Truscott(2007) says “correction most likely has small harmful effects on students’ ability to write accurately and that we can be reasonably confident that if it does have any genuine benefits, they are so small as to be uninteresting” (p.256).In a review article, Truscott argues that grammar correction is not effective because “students will repeat the same mistake over and over again and this is attributed to the student most of the time who is not tentative or lazy”( Truscott,1996: p.369), but our duty as researchers is to look for the gap and try some practices that might work and prevent this repetition of mistakes. We do not need to correct; we need to show them how to correct. This can be done through an editing conference between the teacher and the student.

## Method

### *Methodological Approach*

The researchers opted for learner corpora research in which one of them gathered large corpora of the students' paragraphs and compositions weekly from the beginning of the year for more than a semester in order to notice any development. Indeed, there was progress in students' writing at many levels, but issues of low concern like S-V agreement and run-ons remain unsolved. The researchers then decided to analyze the students' progress as a group of ten students in depth using an elaborate feedback form (conferencing). Each student wrote three composition drafts weekly for four weeks. All in all, the students wrote 120 drafts, and 40 drafts were examined to determine frequency of errors.

### *Participants*

Ten second year students of English at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University - Sétif 2- (Algeria) took part in this study. The teacher's acquaintance with a class of 36 students for more than a semester giving different writing practices helped her to select a group of ten students who have frequent errors in S-V agreement and run-ons. This sample is selected according to the students' needs because not all students in the class have similar problems and the number of the sample is bound with the time that a conferencing session takes especially at a composition level.

### *Target Problems*

When providing feedback, the teacher could not ignore some problematic aspects of content or other accuracy problems, but most discussion in the conferencing sessions focused on two target problems: Subject-verb agreement and run-on sentences (comma splice and fused sentences).

### *Design*

One of the two authors of the present paper took the responsibility of providing feedback on students' compositions in all conferencing sessions at the time of the study. All participants wrote about the same topic suggested by the teacher, and each time they generated and organized their ideas before producing their first drafts which were self-revised to produce second drafts. Conferencing sessions with the writing teacher were scheduled after writing the second drafts, and instances of errors were counted in the overall composition before the conferencing sessions. The students are required to write a third draft after the editing conference with the teacher. In addition, the writing conferences were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

### *Example of a Conferencing Episode*

T stands for teacher and S for student.

"...It **create** problems between couples, and **increase** divorce rate..."

T: ok, um can you see any mistake in that sentence?

S: hmm

S: no!

T: ok, read the sentence loudly.

S: It creates; the "s" oh my God!

T: Read the sentence again

S: "It creates problems between couples, and increases divorce rate"

**T:** ah! so you paid attention to the mistake in the second verb?

**S:** yeah

**T:** nice

**T:** you have good ideas, but over use of such mistakes undermines the quality of your writing.

The teacher in this episode is inviting the student to read a sentence that includes S-V agreement mistakes because as the student reads loudly, s/he will listen to his/her own writing bringing him/her to a more conscious level of rethinking and re-seeing what s/he has written (Seow, 2002). Then, the teacher raises the student awareness to the good content s/he wrote showing how surface errors interrupt the reader many times.

### *Examples of Errors from Students' Writing*

The following are some examples, put in bold characters, selected randomly from students' compositions.

#### 1. **Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement** <sup>2</sup>

- "Divorce **mean** the separation between parents".
- "For many years, human society **have** been changing"

#### 2. **Run-on Sentences: O** is a symbol that we used to illustrate the place where the two independent clauses run together

- "The most dangerous effect of watching too much TV is on educational life, **O** this may lead to failure, **O** students will give more interest to watching TV over their studies."
- "Even though TV is a tool of entertainment, **O** it still affect our life, **O** it **cause** many bad effects."
- "Modern life is very different from ancient life **O** it has brought a lot of positive changes."
- "The latter has negative effects on children's life because it can destroy their life **O** they may become homeless and unprotected".
- "Children may become unsociable persons **O** they are exposed to different kinds of violence".

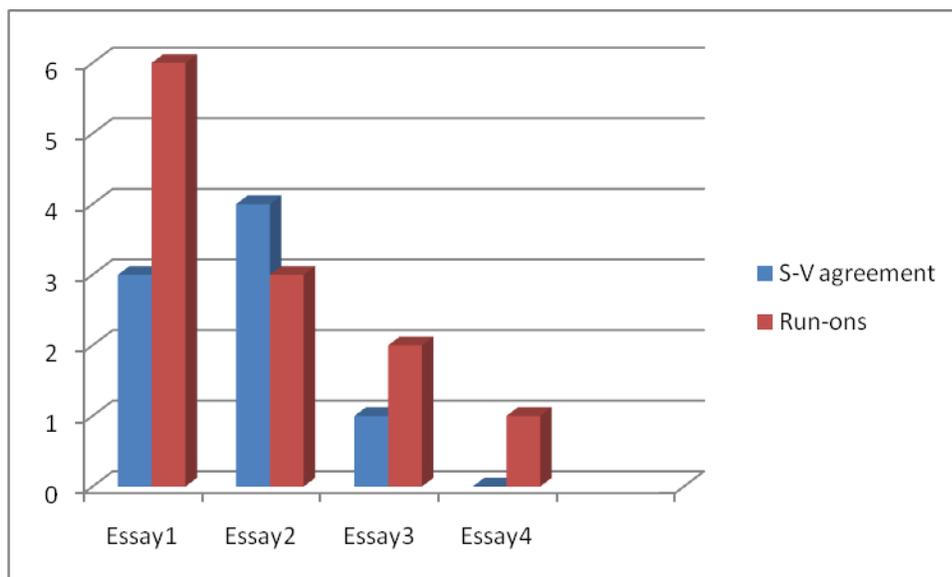
### **Findings and Discussion**

Instances of errors were counted in each essay and did not appear in the edited drafts because all revisions were perfectly successful. Also, our aim is not to test short-term editing behaviors, but longitudinal rather because subject-verb agreement is a very basic rule that can easily be corrected and much practice was done earlier in the writing course on run-ons in discussing effective sentences in which the students revealed successful corrections at the sentence level tasks. The students are able to correct a run-on sentence in a separate exercise, but unable to identify it in a whole composition. The participants are referred to as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9 and S10. The following table illustrates the errors in the four compositions written by S1.

**Student 1: S1**

**Table1: Summary of S1's Errors**

	Number of mistakes	
	S-V agreement	Run-ons
Essay1	3	6
Essay2	4	3
Essay3	1	2
Essay4	0	1

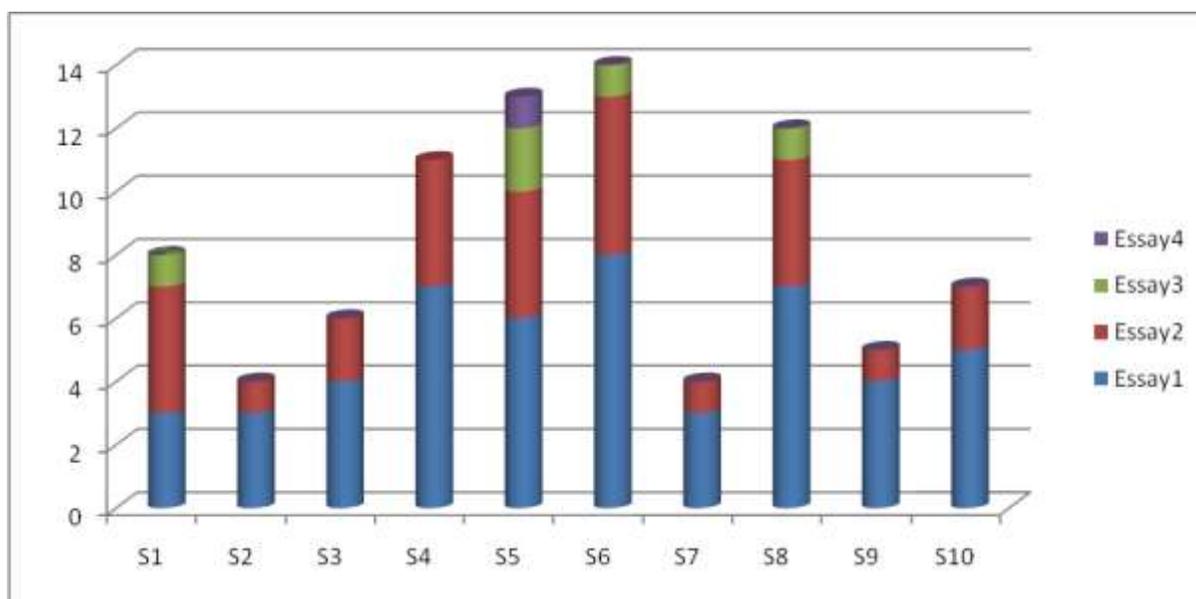


**Figure 1. S-V Agreement & Run-ons Errors in S1's Writing**

S1's errors reported in table 1 reveal a radical change in subject-verb agreement and a gradual treatment of run-ons, moving from 6 errors in essay 1 to 1 error in essay 4. The findings in S1 papers (essay 1 to essay 4) show that the student made statistically significant reductions in her errors. What is noticed is that S-V agreement errors increased in the second essay which leads the teacher to remind the student in the conferencing session about the mark she will have if continuing to write carelessly. "Giving the students an immediate sense of their final grade could be motivating"(Ferris,2002,p.329) This strategy worked for that student to reduce her errors to one S-V agreement error per essay to eliminate it in the fourth one. The following table summarizes S-V agreement errors in 10 students writing through the four essays.

**Table 2. Summary of Students' S-V Agreement Errors**

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
Essay1	3	3	4	7	6	8	3	7	4	5
Essay2	4	1	2	4	4	5	1	4	1	2
Essay3	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	0
Essay4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

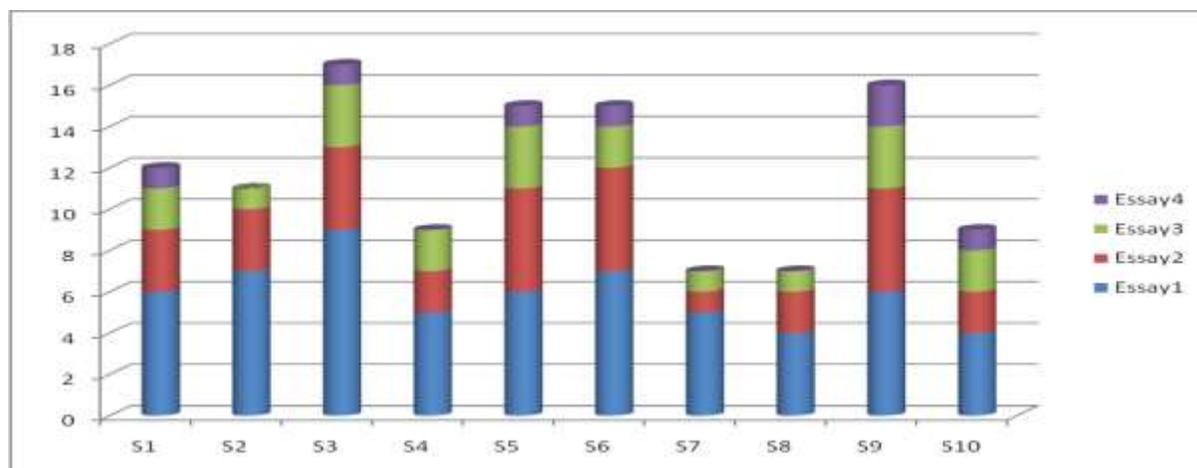


**Figure 2. S-V Agreement Error Decrease throughout four Conferencing Sessions**

Improvement in all students’ writing accuracy concerning the error S-V agreement is very apparent from Graph 2. There is a noticeable error decrease in essay 2 to reach surprising results by essay 3 in which S2, S3, S4, S7, S9 and S 10 were able to eradicate the error definitely and they reached the same satisfying results in essay4. S1, S6 and S8 gradually decreased S-V disagreements to reach no error in essay 4. Only S5 completed the fourth essay with only one error while his first essay contained 6 errors.

**Table 3. Summary of Students’ Run-ons Errors**

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
Essay1	6	7	9	5	6	7	5	4	6	4
Essay2	3	3	4	2	5	5	1	2	5	2
Essay3	2	1	3	2	3	2	1	1	3	2
Essay4	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	2	1



**Figure 3. Run-ons Error Decrease throughout four Conferencing Sessions**

In conferencing sessions, the students reflected that they focused on the flow of their ideas the reason why they generally produce run-ons; but when they are told to correct, they are unable to do so. Some students were unable to identify the run-on sentence. They were shown how to divide the paragraphs into units (from the beginning of the sentence till the placement of the period). Those units will be then checked as to whether or not they are run-ons through counting the number of independent clauses within. When they are able to identify the number of clauses, the treatment is easy because they were trained how to do so in earlier sessions through four possible ways: inserting a period, inserting a semicolon, coordination or subordination.

Results in Figure 3 show that the students made four to nine errors per essay, and this is a serious problem that certainly harms the essay accuracy and the overall content message. Through conferencing with the teacher, the students achieved a noticeable gradual reduction in the number of errors in which only one student (S9) finished writing essay 4 with two run-ons and five students (S1, S3, S5, S6 and S10) reduced their error gradually to make only one error in essay 4 while four students (S2, S4, S7 and S8) among 10 participants managed to eliminate the problem completely in the fourth essay.

It is therefore clearly significant that the positive change in students' accuracy errors can occur after two conferences. These results confirm our hypotheses stated earlier: Teacher-student conferencing can reduce run-ons, but eradicate subject-verb disagreement in Sétif 2 University students' writing. This leads to confirm the main hypothesis that "Teacher-student conferencing is an effective way to improve the grammatical accuracy."

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Our discussion leads to some suggestions for teachers. First, writing teachers should take students' pieces of writing periodically to indicate major problems to be focused on in giving feedback because students cannot indicate their weaknesses measured with appropriation, and if they work repeatedly on a few types of errors, a definite reduction and longitudinal results will be achieved. For teachers also to improve students' linguistic control over their writing, they have to strictly consider accuracy errors when evaluating the students' writing in order to raise the students' awareness in early stages to avoid the problem in Master levels. This implication is not limited to writing teachers only; it also serves all content subject teachers' purposes in order to raise Algerian students' awareness on accuracy in content modules.

There should be a kind of flexibility in selecting the feedback approach in teaching writing because both content and form are important for the communicative effectiveness of any piece of writing. On the one hand, spotting grammatical mistakes only is not sufficient, but on the other hand, giving more focus to the content and meaning only will lead to a good content but inaccurate product. Therefore, feedback approach should be flexible according to the students' needs and weaknesses.

More focus on the editing process is recommended in which the role of the teacher should be teaching students how to edit not asking them to self/ peer edit because the students show a big gap between knowing the error and identifying the error type. Once the students are trained how to edit, self or peer editing become very useful. In this regard, Seow (2002) says "The

students are, however, not always expected to know where and how to correct every error, but editing to the best of their ability should be done as a matter of course, prior to submitting their work for evaluation each time.” (p.319)

### Conclusion

The study participants were able to make correct changes in response to teacher feedback. With this finding, we can add our voice to previous research findings about the effectiveness of teacher's corrective feedback in making successful student revisions on the drafts of their essays. In addition, students show progress in grammatical accuracy over time highlighting the effectiveness of a new feedback method in helping not only to reduce, but also to eliminate finally some accuracy problems in the written product. The findings also support the claims of previous researchers that feedback should be focused on and modeled to the students' needs. Therefore, conferencing with students on form, including certain kinds of error correction, is beneficial to the students and it is not a type of feedback that is limited to content. This is justified on the ground that accuracy of the written product matters and its importance is bound up with the communicative effectiveness of any piece of writing.

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