

Assessing English Grammar Assessment and Feedback: a Case Study of King Khalid University (KKU) Students

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Abstract

This article investigates strategies to improve communicative grammar feedback effectiveness. The motivation for the study is that instructing communicative grammar has been regarded as crucial to the ability to use language by English language learners (ELL). As the fundamental organizing principle of language, grammar plays a critical role in establishing communicative tasks, proficiency, and accuracy. It facilitates the syntactic system of the language, the structure which holds the language together. Moreover, a recent research literature review supports the contextualized grammar effectiveness, especially with EFL learners' instruction, and has a considerable impact on the writing performance of adult English language learners (ELL). A renewed interest in grammar from teaching, learning and research perspectives has created the need for new approaches to assessing the grammatical ability of the ELL and evaluating the outcome of the assessment. The objective of this study is to provide insight into how to motivate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to welcome the assessment of their grammar in the student-centered and teacher-guided environment. It has been made based on the research, performed at the King Khalid University with basic level students, taking Intensive English Grammar course at the KKU. The article questions whether assessing Grammar appropriately in a well-organized, effective manner leads to the productive steps forward for EFL learners. Ultimately, the information obtained endorses, that the targeted grammar feedback tailored to the needs of the students of the particular EFL levels, should be organized in a certain constructive positive and practical way to meet the content of the instruction, and, finally, fit the target of the University education.

Keywords: corrective feedback (CF); grammar assessment; grammar feedback; grammar feedback assessment; grammar feedback effectiveness.

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Introduction

The studying of English grammar is considered to be an essential aspect of the process of learning English by Saudi students. In these regards, it is needless to point out the significance of assessing grammar feedback. Truly, producing grammar feedback by the Instructor is not only about the general language enhancement of the ELL students. So, what is the best way to respond to the errors of the students taking grammar classes?

Teachers continue to mark grammar errors with students embracing that, though “the literature abounds with proof of the futility of marking errors” (Leki, 1991, p.204). So, if English as a foreign language (EFL) Instructors decide that they would like to try alternative ways of commenting on students’ grammar errors, how can they justify the change to themselves and their students? With this question in mind, the current study is the report of the attempt to facilitate the performance of students undertaking Intensive grammar course at one of the top KSA universities by merely using the research, the study, by modifying the attitude of the instructor to the students’ errors and marking, as well as changing the feedback into positive interaction with students as a step forward from a nerve-racking and downgrading experience for EFL students.

Alongside with that, the attempt was made to prove that properly structured error revision techniques after initial assessments and evaluations lead to better marks and follow-up positive reinforcement of the students towards learning English Grammar. The presented study has conducted an English grammar feedback assessment, based on the response which has been provided by the students undertaking an Intensive Grammar credit course at the Faculty of Languages and Translation of King Khalid University.

This study was conducted through a method of series of discussions in class and also self-evaluation surveys of the students during the intensive study of the basic English grammar, and is believed to enhance the pedagogical skill of the instructor, teaching the course, as well as to have direct practical pedagogical implications for other instructors, who follow mentioned above tendencies in teaching EFL.

Ultimately, the linguistic progress momentum is very significant for the theory and practice of teaching EFL/ESL, when the assessment and evaluation can change the learners’ attitudes to teachers’ feedback, the students’ performance and even the professional career goals while improving their tests, quizzes and exams’ marks and directly influencing their future professional communications.

Theoretical Framework

There is a considerable amount of research literature on the topic. The importance of giving feedback has been emphasized by many teachers and researchers (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 2003; Leki 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Semke, 1984; Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 1986). On the other hand, it was underlined that instructors of EFL/ESL must avoid giving too much feedback or “overcorrecting” the students’ writing, especially of grammatical errors. Some linguistic scientists consider that no grammatical errors should be emphasized or marked (Truscott, 1996).

However, many students consider the number of marked grammatical errors should be used as the justification of the given marks for the written assignment, and most teachers agree with this as well. Many researchers and teachers, correspondingly, feel the same kind of a necessity when discussing and evaluating the response to the students' writing. For example, Keh (1990) points out that teacher's corrections, "red marks on students' papers" might seem to prove "the superiority" of the teacher in the knowledge of the subject, and can show that this is the "demonstration" of the job well performed. As Ancker (2000) notes, the interviews with the instructors from different countries and various backgrounds prove the same statement. The review of the literature on this topic also points out that students want grammar correction as much as the teachers (Leki, 1991). Nonetheless, some literature reviews also underline the "futility" of marking grammatical errors, as this doesn't lead to immediate result and avoidance of grammatical errors (Leki, 1991).

For example, Robb et al. (1986) conducted a study of various types of feedback and he divided the students into four groups:

1. Correction group (the instructor corrects all the grammatical errors and doesn't comment on organization and content).
2. Coded feedback group (the instructor marks the errors with a code).
3. Non-coded feedback group (the instructor marks the errors with a highlighter only).
4. Marginal (the number of mistakes is counted and indicated on each line, but no distinct errors are identified and pointed out).

The researcher found that none of the feedback types resulted in "long-term grammatical improvement".

In reality, improving grammar and as a result writing skills has a tremendous impact on the level of the second language acquisition. Currently, researchers underline that writing has a major role in promoting second language development. Writing is even perceived as an instrument for language studying (Manchón, 2011) that allows ELL to integrate new material, test hypotheses, and automatize knowledge (Williams, 2012). Within this standpoint, grammar feedback provided by instructors benefits the language learning process (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). That is why the importance of grammar instruction has never been more obvious.

Even though Ferris (1995) underlines that students' writing provides "little evidence" that mere marking students errors assists students in improving their writing skills, at the same time, he claims that students do benefit from grammar comments and remarks about content and organization. (Ferris, 1995). Raimes (1983) compares understanding and producing accurate grammatical forms with composing, however, he claims it should not become the central focus of the Instructor's feedback.

On Corrective Feedback

The research implies, that corrective feedback (CF) is defined as any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is false (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In their book "Written corrective feedback in second language acquisition and writing" the authors have formulated the

explanation of the corrective feedback as an indication that their use of the target language is incorrect. CF in writing is about incorrect grammatical or lexical use of the target language, and it is unconnected and unassociated with feedback on content. It is not about any comment, suggestion, or clarification request concerning the ideas, organization, or even style or rhetoric peculiarities of the text. Thus, corrective feedback is defined as any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is not error-free (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

There are two major kinds of written corrective feedback: direct CF and indirect CF. Direct CF implies the teacher's provision of the correct form or structure and may take various forms, including crossing out a redundant or unneeded word or phrase, writing the correct form above or in the margin of the error. Indirect CF, on the other hand, refers to the Instructor's indication that an error has been made, but without providing the correct form by the teacher. Certain scientists have stated that indirect CF is more likely to have long-term positive effects on students' accuracy since it requires learners to self-discover the correct forms (Li, 2010). As a matter of fact, that will take place if the students' motivation is indisputable and skill-oriented. Others have maintained that there are several cases in which language instructors should provide more direct feedback on errors. Ferris (2002), for example, has pointed out that learners benefit more from direct correction when they are at the beginning level of proficiency in English when they do not have enough linguistic knowledge to self-correct.

Since English language instructors spend much of their time providing corrective feedback on students' writing in hope of helping them improve grammatical accuracy (Brown, 2012), "to correct" or "not to correct" question is not considered to be even applicable and admissible one. The question is how to provide corrective feedback effectively

On Increasing Grammar Feedback Effectiveness Criteria

So what to do to increase the effectiveness of the feedback on grammar? Students associate grammar with errors and correctness. But knowing about grammar rules also assists to understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear-cut and precise. This issue was highlighted when conducting a study via various class discussions and surveys performed with basic year students, taking an Intensive English Course of Grammar, during the second semester of 2017 (which is the year 1438 by the Hijri calendar) at the King Khalid University's English Language Centre under the guidance of the Faculty of Languages and Translation.

Although many researchers agree that the students wish to see their work corrected and corrected in an organized and logical way with symbols, explanations, and comments, some of them put the effectiveness of the detailed corrections into question. During the study, the medical students of the basic year were requested multiple times to give their comments on which kind of feedback would be useful and reliable for them. They were also questioned about the level of the anxiety this corrective feedback could bring about. As a result, the students expressed the wish to have a "useful" CF, and they informed the instructor they would like to keep it confidential from other students in the highly competitive environment at one of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's top universities' English Language Centre. As a matter of fact, they did not even question the necessity of the grammatical correction and providing of the CF. On the other hand, they were not convinced

about the importance of noticing and marking every mistake, as they felt sure that only the main errors should be noticed and marked.

Nevertheless, Leki (1990) informs us that the students usually express the wish to have every error marked. However, he also points out that the students simply observe the main errors without paying much attention to the instructor's corrections, symbols, and comments. Moreover, as the grade is very important, the grading feedback is the most important criteria for the students in receiving the feedback, and it can be overwhelming for them to spend emotional energy to cover the error content and symbols. A lot of English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) Instructors wish to mark all the students' errors, underlining, using circles, various editing symbols, aiming at the improvement and having the students' best interest at heart. The time the instructors use for that is variable (depending on the tenacity of the instructor and his/her experience) and, of course, is valuable as well.

On the other hand, the time when the students are allowed to view the feedback of the teachers after progress determining quizzes, compositions, midterm grammar, and writing exams, is also extremely precious. That should be equally taken into account when producing feedback. And besides, the instructor must at some point provide the general feedback on most common errors, without going into much detail or, what is much worse, providing students' names for the errors made. That especially concerns the larger EFL classes' students, considering logical reasons provided earlier (time concerns and the students' anxiety level apprehension, as well as KSA female students' privacy respect rationale).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize the benefit of writing instructors that the researchers consider form-focused feedback ineffectual. (Sheppard, 1992; Kepner, 1991). The grammatical correction proves to be productive from the first draft to the revision and final draft (Hillocks, 1986; Truscott, 1996) but doesn't hold long-term effectiveness. On the other hand, the research underlines how the correction comment is given, influences the length of the writing assignment. Indeed, no-comment and negative criticism affect the students in their wish to write shorter essays and fewer exercises.

Since grammar and in general language teachers should spend much of their time providing corrective feedback on students' writing in the hope of helping them improve grammatical accuracy (Brown, 2012), it is important to understand in that sense corrective feedback as a multifaceted intricate practice, and therefore instructors must consider a number of factors and criteria when providing written feedback (Kormos, 2012; Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010). This compound feedback takes into consideration a lot of factors: category of error (Syntax, spelling or vocabulary); motivation and skill level and past experiences of learners; curriculum guidelines, objectives, class sizes, frequency of classes provided, teaching philosophies of instructors, methodological variables, like diagnostic writing assignments, surveys, etc.

So, most of the studies (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hendrickson, 1978, 1980; Lalande, 1982; Walz, 1982) affirm that direct CF and indirect CF are two common types of written corrective feedback. In the case of direct CF, the teacher gives the

correct form to the students, and it is useful for lower-level-of-proficiency students who are unable to self-correct and might be unaware of the correct form. Even though it requires minimal processing on the part of the learners, it may not contribute to long-term learning (Ellis, 2009). A constructive study by Sheen (2007) suggests that direct corrective feedback can be productive in promoting the acquisition of only “specific grammatical features”. Nevertheless, CF proves to be effective, which has been proven by the researchers.

Many students in the study conducted by Dragga (1988), who ultimately wrote in favor of positive feedback and grading, noted that the positive attitude on feedback leads to the “ultimately rewarding experience” and might have even a long-lasting effect on the students’ aptitudes.

It is important to point out that positive feedback, even if it is a small step forward, has an enduring effect on the students’ motivation, leads to some advantage in solving the grammatical errors and, in the long run, has a tremendous impact on the students’ learning.

The necessity of producing the feedback in the most positive way possible, and the prospect of providing clear-cut “organized way “of wrapping up the revision after the tests and exams, were equally tested during the instruction of Intensive Grammar to the students of the basic level. That experience changed the students’ attitude towards the Instructor’s response in a major way; the students became more self-confident and willing to go one step forward in preparing for the exams, as they became aware of the possibility of the positive outcome when constructively dealing with grammar issues. The students shared these observations while writing a grammar assessment feedback survey, as well as during the student-teacher discussions.

Method and Procedure

The design of the study was based on students’ surveys and mutual discussions with the students. The participants were the students of the sections number 1714, 1715 and 1717 (total of 136 students), who were undertaking the Intensive Grammar course during the second semester of 2017 (the year 1438 according to the Hijri calendar). The basic material covered in the course was about the foundations of the English grammar notions and the ability to build simple sentences using correct syntax, verb tenses, prepositions, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, etc. The quantitative data survey method was employed, and the questions’ choice was determined by the obtainable depth of the study.

Moreover, the instrument, used in the study was a grammar feedback questionnaire, and the survey was performed during a very busy semester. Modes of inquiry had to be manageable for the author and the participants. Eventually, two modes were chosen: a multiple-choice questionnaire, and follow up discussions with the students. The participants of the written questionnaire voted to remain anonymous. Thus, the survey and the discussions were conducted among the students at the beginning of the intensive semester on the following questions and opinions.

1. How have your previous language teachers responded to your assignments and your feedback on their grammar correction?

2. What would you choose from the list if your teachers provided feedback based on your wishes?
- More praise than criticism while receiving grammar feedback
 - More criticism than praise while receiving grammar feedback
 - No feedback at all while receiving grammar feedback
 - No praise while receiving grammar feedback
 - No criticism while receiving grammar feedback

The option of utilizing multiple-choice questions was not accidental. According to Shohamy (1984) for example, who investigated the effect of different testing methods on the feedback, while using multiple-choice and open-ended questions, the learners responded better to the multiple-choice questions, especially with basic level EFL students. Based on these earlier studies, the present study aimed at making the questionnaire more comprehensive for the first-year University students.

The students didn't respond effectively to the first question, only stating that the level of the instruction by local Arabic Instructors, working in the Aseer region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, didn't prove to be effective for them. They explained that those students, who achieved better results, were in majority instructed by diligent private tutors, and as there were a lot of students in normal school classes and there was the limited class time according to the curriculum, no time was left for any corrective feedback. The teaching consisted only of lecturing and introducing new grammar material with basically no practice exercises.

Moreover, according to the current research, performed by the Arabic linguists teaching in Saudi Arabia, local instructors of English have more difficulty in teaching not only pronunciation but also the English grammar as the Arabic language belongs to the group of Semitic languages. Arabic has "unique linguistic characteristics", and it shares with other Semitic languages "the root of pattern morphology" which functions as a generator of Arabic words (Al-Huri, 2015). Certainly, this is quite different from the English language system. Also, the Arabic language has an abundance of colloquial forms in the Arab World. All "varieties" are originally "derived from Classical Arabic" (Al-Huri, 2015), while English demonstrates the only widely accepted normative version, and also, the English dialects' morphology and syntax are not much different from each other, at least from the grammar point of view. Moreover, regional diversity in dialect word formation is diminishing due to globalization, with normative English being a real-time instrument in it. Thus, the stated above obtained research results have a direct impact on the local Saudi Arabian style of teaching English grammar at schools by native Arabic speakers.

Based on the feedback of the students of the Intensive English program at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, the study confirmed the so-called "praise over criticism" preference of the students. It is gratifying, that most of the medical students, taking the course, showed a great deal of mature thinking by choosing only one of the options:

"a. More praise than criticism while receiving grammar feedback."

Now let us regard the data analysis and the results of the study.

Data Analysis and Results

In figure 1 you can see the reaction of 136 students of the 3 sections 1714, 1715 and 1717, and it is obvious to note the prevalence of the “a” answer choice.

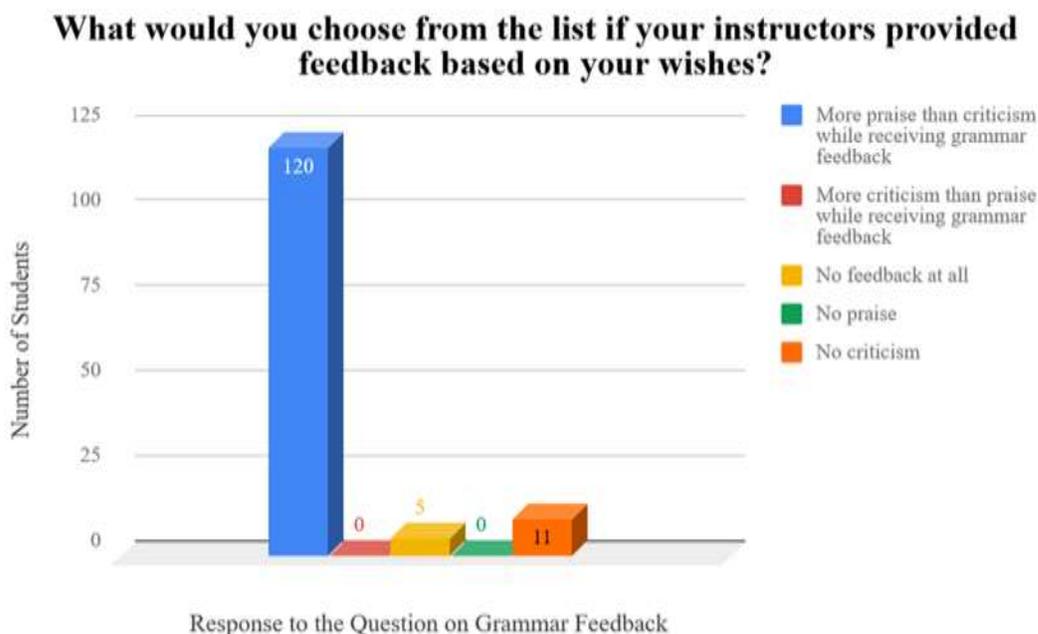


Figure 1. Response of the Basic Year Students to the Question on Grammar Feedback

Going forward, the second self-evaluation was conducted in the middle of the semester between the first and second progress tests. The question was concerning what the instructor should continue doing or stop doing during the instruction of the Grammar course. The majority of the students noted that the final marks were crucial for them, and they would get the most benefit from the structured revision, on their common grammar mistakes after first progress test, and also, from more exercises to avoid those particular errors.

Later on, the students' performance during the second progress test showed the true effectiveness of the shorter more precise, positive and concise feedback, which was supplied by the Instructor even in the point form, underlining all the possible errors of the students when concluding the grammar material of each concerned unit. More grammar exercises are done in class and as homework assisted the students with the knowledge they require escaping the problematic areas during the stressful times of exams, especially when they take multiple skill exams during the same day. That is a crucial point that is not fully grasped by the instructors teaching EFL, especially in the eastern countries with teacher-centered education. More exercises assist students in achieving the knowledge they need to recall it during tests and exams while under pressure. Completing more practical exercises on grammar is an absolute necessity for the ELL learners, as well as, paying adequate attention to the positive reinforcement of the Instructor's response, or the feedback, provided to the students.

Discussion

Analysis of the students' survey outcomes at the end of the course indicated that structured revision plan related to the midterm and final exam preparation in combination with a positive attitude to the students' work, alongside with a lot of practice on grammar rules and English syntax, provided more productive results in relation with the ELL students' grammar errors. The exercises were meticulously developed by the instructor based on the taught grammar material. While the students continually engaged in practicing of grammar rules in simple exercises, they had a chance of developing better skills as compared to the beginning of the instruction of the Intensive English course when they lacked lexico-grammatical patterns' choices and were anxious to avoid grammar mistakes in the written and oral communication activities. In turn, positive reinforcement instead of solely negative feedback played a crucial role.

As a result, the ELL students had more confidence in everyday practice, homework preparation and during the review and testing as well as the exams, getting the deserved results by the end of the course instruction. Learners' increased linguistic aptitude due to the abundance of positive reinforcement would greatly assist them in their university education which implies the ability to write reports, surveys and simply better communicate: including orally, and using a higher level of English competence.

Findings

The study substantiated Leki 's and other researchers' statements about English language students accepting Grammar feedback gracefully (Leki, 1991). At the same time, it contradicts the findings of the mentioned author, who emphasizes the "futility" of marking grammatical errors, as this doesn't lead to immediate results and avoidance of grammatical errors (Leki, 1991). Though the researcher might have the upper hand with stating the pointlessness of marking the grammatical errors in regards to obtaining immediate success, the study underlines the usefulness of error focused practical exercises, which bring Grammar skills improvement gratification without real delay.

Furthermore, the results revealed that the students' increasing awareness of language choices was accompanied by their enhanced assertiveness and desire to speak and write grammatically correct sentences as a result of the instructor's encouraging compliments in the corrective feedback. This proves Dragga's (1988) point of view that positive feedback and assessment testify in favor of "ultimately rewarding experience" for basic level students.

Needless to point out that the study within its boundaries was unable to measure the positive feedback's effect on the long-term writing accuracy of the students, and the grammar precision and writing correctness of the low-level students might as well be delayed.

Nevertheless, the study has proved that the beginning EFL learners always require error-correcting and constructive grammar feedback, proving the current research on that matter (Ferris, 2002; Brown, 2012). Moreover, the students see their evaluation justification in this particular way of error-correcting, which implies positive corrective feedback. Furthermore, the improvement in the basic level students' grammar performance would certainly be apparent in the Intensive Writing, Speaking, Listening and Reading courses taught at the ELC.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that combining more grammar exercising and productive revision techniques with positive reinforcement enables instructors to develop useful tasks and materials promoting the concurrent development of linguistic knowledge and writing ability even with the lower level of ESL/EFL students.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not a methodical and scrupulous experimental study with many experimental groups, or all the basic level students, taking the Intensive English course during the second semester of 2017 (Hijri 1438) at the English Language Centre of the King Khalid University's Faculty of Languages and Translation. The reflections and observations expressed can be taken to represent the attitudes of the particular students under the specific circumstances of the study described.

Conclusion

Summing it up, it is not the fruitlessness of the grammar correction and grammar errors prevention that undermines the obtained results in teaching ELL, but the inadequacy, deficiency of the detailed study plan, provided by the EFL/ESL instructors. Each developed Grammar lesson plan should boast with an abundance of fruitful activities aimed at the ELL students' grammar faults' prevention, and, undoubtedly, the revision procedure should not be overdone with praise and neither be over perfected.

Unquestionably, it is a naiveté to expect immediate results without putting students' motivation and energy into mastering a very important linguistic competence, grammar skill, like any other ability in progress, including, for example, vocabulary learning or contextualized listening skill. Certainly, content-based practice and targeted written and oral discourse exercises are essential for enhancing the most communicative of all the human aptitudes, the language communication, which includes mastering the system and the structure of the studied language, its syntax, and morphology. This development of students' linguistic ability should be performed by the EFL/ESL instructors positively and engagingly, in a relentless battle with anxiety and demotivation, while bringing about even compelling drama and gripping role-play exercises, especially with basic level students.

Finally, from the pedagogical standpoint, the language students must be awarded more commend and appreciation, extra inspiration, better chances to find their courage to overcome their grammar errors in their everyday contextualized grammar "workout" activities, which will, for sure, be full of their "real-life" mistakes. Moreover, there are no two ways about it: the errors are unavoidable. The instructors and the ELL students should not be unaware of, but, on the contrary, fully mindful of that, and the study confirmed a complete grasp of this by the medical students at KKU, as well as the necessity of amending and revising each major grammatical error, as work for language improvement in progress.

As a result, grammar feedback positively provided by the instructors, alongside with praise and approval for more attempts during the grammar assessment, a structured revision plan is not a gatekeeper but a door opener for the EFL students, for the better English grammar learning aptitudes.

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