

EFL Student-Directed Feedback for Improving Academic Writing Skills in Thailand

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Abstract

Exploring how written corrective feedback can help learners optimize their writing skills has always been an interest to teachers in the field of English language teaching. This action research involves a group of 28 intermediate English as Foreign Language students in the English as a Foreign Language Grammar course with an emphasis on academic writing development at an international university in Thailand. The study focuses on two academic essays produced by the learners over a 14-week semester in which students are required to submit two drafts of each of the essays on the assigned topics. Student-Directed Feedback is used to allow the students to choose between various delivery formats for the feedback and ask some specific questions about their work to which the students need answering. With questionnaires also surveying students' attitudes given at the end of the course, it is revealed that Student-Directed Feedback has had perceived positive effects on most of the students in terms of feedback particularity, personalisation and higher learner autonomy.

Keywords: Student-Directed Feedback, academic writing skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners

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Introduction

Written corrective feedback is widely known to play a crucial role in EFL writing and thus, feedback and error correction methods have been investigated considerably from various points of view in many ESL, EFL and ELF contexts. There is a continuing discussion on the efficacy of different types of corrective feedback; however, it has been agreed upon that there is no definite indication of the most practical written corrective feedback in different environments. By and large, teachers and students often feel bombarded by traditional corrective feedback given on written assignments or tasks and the literature usually reflects concerns regarding the effectiveness of various practices in which teachers and students are involved, including the intelligibility of feedback comments; authority over written texts; and the significance of correcting grammatical errors (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006; Hart, 2011, Truscott, 1996).

This research was conducted to see if Student-Directed Feedback (SDF) could mitigate the concerns over effective corrective feedback and find out the extent to which it can be used to help to develop learners' writing and academic skills. Student-directed feedback is defined as feedback which learners can ask to receive in a certain format and on particular aspects of their written work. Contrary to peer review, this kind of feedback is provided by the teacher but it is the learners who direct in what ways and what they receive comments on (Campbell & Schumm-Fauster, 2013). The objectives of the study are to identify the forms of feedback EFL university students would like to have most and what aspects of written feedback they believe benefit their writing development and how. Two main research questions in the study are:

1. What forms of Student-Directed Feedback do EFL university learners prefer to receive on their English academic writing?
2. What aspects of written language has Student-Directed Feedback helped them to improve, and to what extent?

The paper first introduces the relevant background of the study, the objectives and research questions, the review of the literature on corrective feedback, and the research design followed by the findings and the discussion and it ends with the conclusion of the study respectively.

Literature Review

Despite the extensive research on corrective feedback undertaken in the past few decades, some issues on feedback practices appear to be unrequited, causing EFL teachers to question feedback usefulness and applicability (Alkhamash & Gulnaz, 2019; Gedik Bal, 2022; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006). It has also been found that current literature on corrective feedback has pointed out some gaps in research in investigating what EFL teachers do while correcting student writing and why they do it in such a particular manner (Ferris, 2014). Moreover, how well corrective feedback has been taken and perceived by learners in EFL contexts to the extent that it can help them improve needs further investigation. Therefore, to understand the actual needs of EFL teachers and learners in context, and to connect the gap between research and practice, research in written corrective feedback should focus on realistic pedagogical environments. Moreover, Lee (2014) indicates that most of the feedback research has been undertaken in the first language and English as Second Language (ESL) contexts predominantly in English-speaking countries such as America, England, Australia, New Zealand and India. As a result, there is a rising need to encompass more corrective feedback research in various EFL settings and even in other distinct contexts from around the world.

Feedback is information given by an authority on aspects of one's act (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Thus, there are two types of feedback in general, *positive* and *negative*. In the EFL context, positive feedback is approval from the teacher which affirms a correct linguistic production by the student. *Negative feedback*, on the contrary, is a remark from the teacher after an incorrect expression by the student. *Corrective feedback*, both oral and written, is overall seen as negative as it involves error revision. Although oral corrective feedback is usually offered as part of teaching and learning within the classroom, written corrective feedback is more often than not written responses provided by the teacher after reviewing students' written responses. Thus, language teachers may have to give several comments on student writing, varying from mechanics to content clarity. As a result, teachers help students to become aware of what is right in the target language (Chandler, 2003) which supports second language learning. Written corrective feedback is an important mechanism in drawing students' attention to correct linguistic features. Nevertheless, the usefulness of written corrective feedback is debatable. According to Truscott (1996), written corrective feedback is not only useless but also unfavourable. He argued that written corrective feedback produces only a meaningless form of knowledge, which has a negative outcome on learning. Consequently, it can decrease student drive to learn because it brings about anxiety and lack of confidence making way for unnecessary streamlined writing. Also, error treatment takes time and it inhibits active learning (Truscott, 1996).

Swain (2005) agrees that disclosure to intense intelligible input is the only requisite for Second Language (L2) acquisition and output since an effective communicative protocol encourages learning by promoting the learners to assess their linguistic competence in contexts. Following Bitchner and Storch (2016), in recent years, more research points to the upsides of written corrective feedback in L2 development. One of the gains of L2 written corrective feedback is that the written output remains and can actually be re-examined by the learners, which provides an opportunity to have metacognition in learning the target language.

Educators have also studied the likelihood of different kinds of written corrective feedback in EFL taking into account the nature of errors which language teachers should be aware of in teaching academic writing. Ellis (2009) points out the choice of errors to focus on. Two concerns regarding the choice of errors arise whether to rectify all the errors or to opt for some error corrections. It is then advised that it be best to emphasize a few types of errors. Likewise, indirect feedback in which the error is revealed with no correction is supported by some EFL scholars. In line with Ferris' (2014) proposition, indirect feedback appears to be more advantageous than direct feedback, especially for future development. Lately, utilizing electronic platforms in giving written corrective feedback is gradually regular and providing a succinct response to a certain error and access to sources revealing the appropriate usage can inspire students to correct themselves and have better metalinguistic awareness (Ellis, 2009).

Methodology

As action research, this research looks into a phenomenon in which learners are often faced with difficulties in receiving written corrective feedback while learning English in an EFL classroom. To deal with such problems, in this study, learners are given some options in receiving corrective feedback as to the format and the aspect of feedback needed. After the investigation, how well the efforts worked is measured and if the results are still not satisfactory, the steps are to be adapted with anticipation to yield better outcomes in the future. It can be said that this working approach is about learning by doing and trying to find the best possible solution to the problems

and this process is bound to be unending as there is always room for further improvement. The study also aims to shed light on an inquiry into the meanings and values of individuals, EFL learners, and the ways they interpret what they encounter and experience in EFL classrooms and contexts. It is therefore important to understand learner behaviors and perceptions because every learner is unique and perceives the world and approaches complications they undergo differently.

Participants

A class of 28 intermediate EFL junior and senior students enrolled in the EFL Grammar Essentials course at an international university in Thailand was the sample group in this study. The students are of mixed nationalities, five of whom are Chinese and the others are Thai. The students were mostly in their junior and senior years in a 4-year undergraduate degree program in Business English at a university in Thailand. Twenty-two of them is female whereas the six others are male. They were purposively chosen to take part in this study as they were all Business English majors who have been learning English as a foreign language for more than 15 years. Five of them had experience studying overseas and five others have been to English-speaking countries including Australia, the UK and the USA either to travel or study for some time. Having completed English IV, the final and most advanced of the four mandatory English courses at the university, the students were considered medium to high achieving in respect of their academic achievement as shown in their cumulative Grade Point Averages (GPAs) between 2.15 to 3.76 out of a four-point scale. All students reported having taken some writing tasks in almost every subject in the study program.

Research Instruments

To obtain data from the students, two research instruments were utilized. The two essays along with their drafts were used as the initial instrument in which the students had to write two essays of 250 words each. Each essay required a draft submission so that corrective feedback could be given in the process. One essay was expository and the other was meant to be argumentative. The two essay topics included “Define the meaning of true friendship” and “Learners have to be educated, but they also have to learn things for themselves” accordingly.

After the first drafts of both essays were turned in, the students were able to indicate what kind of delivery formats they preferred to receive the feedback on and then they also had to inquire about their written work, which could be on register, lexis, grammar, reasoning, and creativity. The six forms of feedback available were written remarks, email comments, face-to-face communication comments, traditional corrections on paper, and teacher’s responses to certain questions or issues which the students doubt and LINE comments. The students were allowed to choose to receive more than one form of feedback if they were required to.

Another method used to collect the data in this study is a questionnaire. The questionnaire used to discover students’ attitudes is one conventional method to investigate Thai EFL learners’ views of the efficacy of self-directed feedback the students experienced and perceived after having successfully written two essays and received all the feedback from the lecturer. The questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale with seven questions was designed to direct and assess the level of the participants’ views of agreement. The justifications for why the questionnaire was also used in collecting data are that a questionnaire is a practical way anticipated to attain the learners’ views properly (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Second, with a concise and focused questionnaire, the data collection process is doable within one semester, causing less inconvenience and time for the

research participants. In this study, only the English version of the questionnaire was administered as the students, both Thai and non-Thai were learning in the international program which uses English in teaching and learning for all courses. Overall, the research procedures took about one semester to complete in the first semester of the 2021 academic year.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data on the forms of feedback were first analysed to see how many students preferred what types of feedback with an attempt to rank the most and the least commonly requested delivery formats from a total of six forms given. Subsequently, the data were further collected quantitatively at the end of the course by written questionnaires which surveyed learners' attitudes towards different delivery formats and the perceived effectiveness of learner-directed feedback for improving general written English and academic skills.

The quantitative data analysis for the questionnaires was carried out with PASW statistics 18. With descriptive statistics employed, the evaluation scores of the learner's views of the agreement were presented. Following B. Sommer and R. Sommer (2002), it is considered sensible to employ more than one method to examine data or investigate the research for further relevant data. Having more than one method of data collection and/or analysis in a research study is a well-established norm in the social sciences field (Alexander, Thomas, Cronin, Fielding & Moran-Ellis, 2008). There is also growing evidence that researchers have attempted to use more than one quantitative method of inquiry (Fielding, Burningham, Thrush, & Catt, 2007). It seems that no matter how many methods are used, two main issues arise: justification for their employment and, how the data obtained in different sets would be incorporated (Monrad, 2013).

Findings

To respond to the first research question, some major findings can be addressed: the most preferred feedback delivery formats the students chose.

Table 1: *Forms of feedback requested and received on English academic writing*

Forms of feedback	Number of students (in order of preference)
LINE feedback	19
Email responses	15
Teacher's feedback on some questions	10
In-text corrections (traditional revisions)	7
Written remarks	6
Face-to-face feedback consultation	4

The students in this study mostly preferred to receive feedback via the LINE application, which is also equipped with audio-recording features allowing them to ask or probe further if needed. In addition, some students favored comments via emails. Communicating via email is functional these days as it is quick and responsive. Given that the students can specify to have some feedback specifically given to certain questions, many of them found this form of feedback useful and preferable. Feedback flexibility is one element that many EFL learners consider. In-text corrections or the traditional method of written feedback came fourth, followed by written remarks. Face-to-face feedback consultation was found to be the least preferred type of feedback the students would ask for and receive on their English academic writing.

By and large, the questionnaire survey responses showed that students felt comfortable using learner-directed feedback and found it quite motivating as it encouraged them to independently evaluate their own writing. Most of the students also valued the level of detail which stemmed from the speed and scope that LINE and emails enable digitally. Moreover, audio feedback features in LINE could allow the students to identify through the teacher's intonation exactly how positive or negative a comment was. Having individual feedback emailed or recorded also intensified the feeling that it was personal and particular and that the teacher had invested time in helping them individually and deliberately.

With regards to the second research question on what aspects of written language the students perceived that directed feedback has helped them improve. The findings revealed that, overall, the number of students perceiving general aspects of their writing as having been improved by different types of learner-directed feedback was considerably higher than those perceiving no improvement (see Table two). The students perceived that their understanding of English grammar, transitional words, and sentence structure improved dramatically. In the meantime, knowledge of natural expressions, text structure or organization and vocabulary was found to improve as well at a medium level. The exception was with punctuation in which few students reported slight improvement from the feedback given in this aspect. This may be because per se a small number of students asked certain questions about their use of punctuation (no question meant no feedback). Perhaps concentration on other skills led to the neglect of what is often considered minor errors in general. Still, open-ended responses were generally positive and explained that learner-directed feedback, by being more specific and detailed than traditional feedback, motivated students to eagerly and keenly seek corrections by themselves.

Table 2. *Aspects of general written English Student-Directed Feedback has helped to improve*

Aspects of language	Number of students	Level of improvement
Grammar	18	Significant
Natural expressions	8	Moderate
Punctuation	5	Slight
Transitions	13	Significant
Sentence structure	20	Significant
Text structure	9	Moderate
Vocabulary	10	Moderate

In addition, key academic skills such as critical thinking, analytical reading, proofreading and dealing with feedback were all perceived as having substantially improved through learner-directed feedback. There were some interesting differences in other responses, for example, the number of students indicating that learner-directed feedback significantly helped with choosing and narrowing a topic is similar to the number of students perceiving no improvement in this skill.

Standard responses from the survey regarding academic skills once more praised specificity, the customized nature of the feedback, and heightened motivation to develop their academic abilities. Several students claimed that learner-directed feedback helped them to think more critically and present arguments and positions more logically, and some were even delighted to have skills deficiencies highlighted by learner-directed feedback that they had not anticipated.

Based on these results, it can be argued that learner-directed feedback is a viable alternative to traditional feedback. The findings also address issues of intelligibility, authority over the written texts, motivation, and the revision of grammatical errors.

Discussion

Based on the findings, the use of LINE, an application popular among the current generation, was favored by most of the students in this study. This came as no surprise as it is the most widely used platform of communication in the 21st century in many countries around the world including Asia owing to its convenience and accessibility on the mobile device (Eun-ji & McCracken, 2015). According to Van De Bogart and Wichadee (2015), it was found that at university Thai students were satisfied with using LINE as they considered it to be helpful for various academic reasons.

Emails were found to be the second most preferred feedback form. One clear advantage of using emails is that messages, comments, and attachments can be stored for permanent retention, which makes it better than any other communication platforms such as LINE and WeChat which have limited validity periods (El-Sabban, 2009). On the contrary, it would appear that face-to-face meetings to discuss written feedback could create more frustration and tension for the students and thus the majority of the students chose to avoid receiving this form of feedback (Ferris, 2003). Some students who are outgoing and more interactive and inquisitive in nature would prefer to meet with the teacher in person to discuss any doubts or questions they have.

Differences in students' responses on the usefulness of Student-Directed Feedback were reported as some claimed that it greatly helped them improve their writing skills while some argued against its practicality with English writing. These points can be attributed to learners' different previous experiences that come into play when immersing into a foreign or second language learning environment (Forman, 2014).

In terms of supporting learner-centeredness, allowing students to choose a delivery format for their feedback means that each student can receive feedback in a form that matches his or her fortes and preferences. Digital delivery formats enable more detail in feedback and can facilitate intelligibility. It was also found that students who study via digital-equipped programs are more active and have better attitudes towards learning than those studying in traditional classrooms (Banditvilai, 2016). Moreover, by allowing students to request help with specific aspects of their writing, Student-Directed Feedback encourages learner reflection, self-editing, and learner autonomy while leaving the authority over the text with the student author. It also eliminates some of the urgency from experts or gurus in the field to agree on a single correct solution to the issue of grammatical correction. All of these benefits of Student-Directed Feedback have a motivating, positive effect on the students.

Conclusion

The study aims to identify the forms of feedback EFL university students prefer to have most and what aspects of written feedback are perceived to help hone their writing skills and how. The overall results of this study lead to the conclusion that learner-directed feedback is a useful tool for developing and supplementing learners' writing and academic skills and highlight compelling rationale for adopting learner-directed feedback in academic writing courses. The main findings would also justify implementing the approach in other EFL classrooms and contexts. The follow-up of this study hence should pursue a closer investigation into the practices using additional types of corrective feedback forms not included in this study. In addition, although it is easier to process, the somewhat small number of participants in this study may to some extent restrict the results' generalizability. Future research could broaden the study over a longer time and observe the efficacy of Student-Directed Feedback in enhancing student writing. It is vital to

consider how and to what extent the students can benefit from self-directed feedback. Diversity in participants and academic writing courses, considering multiculturalism and inferential statistics, can suggest useful insights into corrective feedback studies.

About the Author

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