Learners’ Perceptions of Written Corrective Feedback in a Thai EFL Context

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Abstract

Previous studies have suggested that the teacher’s feedback is essential in EFL writing classes, and the benefits of feedback have been confirmed. Studies have also revealed that some types of written corrective feedback are more appropriate for learners with higher English proficiency while others are more appropriate for learners with lower proficiency. The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of English major students at a Thai university of the teachers’ written corrective feedback. The study further examined whether students with different achievement levels, higher achievers and lower achievers, have different perceptions of written corrective feedback. Fifty-one fourth-year English major students were asked to complete the questionnaire. Among those students were twenty higher achievers (with a GPA higher than 3.00) and twenty lower achievers (with a GPA lower than 2.50). The collected data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. The results revealed that students in general had very positive attitudes towards written corrective feedback—the mean rating score was 4.75. Most of them preferred indirect feedback and considered it more effective than direct feedback. However, whether the students preferred focused feedback and considered it more effective than unfocused feedback was not confirmed; about half of the students considered unfocused feedback more effective than focused feedback, and among them were 40% higher achievers and 55% lower achievers.

Keywords: EFL, writing, written corrective feedback (written CF)

1. Introduction

Teacher feedback is considered essential in EFL writing classes; it can be viewed as a response to learners’ errors. Learners can develop their linguistic knowledge of forms and structures through written corrective feedback, which is also known as error correction. As knowledge of forms and structures is what all language learners need, how to develop this knowledge is one of the important goals of all language courses [1]. As reported in a study by Sajjadi et al. [2], in which L2 writing teachers in 29 cities were surveyed, written corrective feedback is commonly provided by teachers in L2 writing classes. In recent studies (Chen et al. [3] and Amrhein and Nassaji [4] for example), students have shown positive attitudes towards written corrective feedback as they believe it helps them improve their writing skills and their linguistic knowledge of the target language. Learners’ attitudes can never be ignored, as their attitudes toward the teacher’s written corrective feedback can affect their overall attitudes toward learning the language, in either a positive or negative way.

The present study surveyed students’ overall attitudes towards written CF and how they perceived different types of written CF and which types of written CF they preferred. It also investigated which types of errors they thought should be corrected. Whether the two groups of students with different achievement levels—higher-achieving students and lower-achieving students—have different perceptions and preferences towards written CF was also investigated.
2. Literature review
As cited in a study by Sermsook et al. [5], corrective feedback in writing classes can be defined as “a teacher’s indication given to students in order to let them know that their written work contains errors” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). In providing written corrective feedback, teachers write correct answers and write their comments on the students’ papers [5].

Whether written corrective feedback helps learners improve the quality and accuracy of their writing or not is still controversial. In some studies (Farrokhi and Sattarpour [6], and Maleki and Eslami [7], for example) feedback has been reported as being effective in improving the students’ writing ability while it has been reported as ineffective in other studies (Truscott [8], for example).

Types of written corrective feedback have been studied in different contexts, and the benefits have been confirmed in several recent studies. These studies have revealed that some types of written corrective feedback are more appropriate for learners with higher English proficiency while others are more appropriate for learners with lower proficiency. In a number of studies, direct feedback (where explicit correction is given) is more effective than indirect feedback (where errors are indicated but not corrected). Indirect feedback tends to be more appropriate for learners with higher language proficiency, but it is not recommended for lower-proficiency learners as their linguistic knowledge and their ability to correct the errors in their work tend to be limited [1].

Focused feedback—where the teacher corrects some specific types of errors—has been found in recent studies to be more effective than unfocused feedback—where the teacher indicates all of the errors. Farrokhi and Sattarpour’s study [6] also suggested that focused feedback is more effective in improving high-proficient learners’ grammar. However, a study by Karimi and Fotovatnia [9] in an EFL Iranian context suggested that focused feedback and unfocused feedback were equally effective in improving the grammatical accuracy in the students’ writing.

Which type of feedback students value and prefer is an interesting issue, and teachers might need to know what students consider effective for them and what they prefer in their writing. Teachers always expect their students to get the best benefits from the feedback, and learning about their perceptions may help guide teachers in providing their feedback more effectively. Additionally, it is important to know what types of errors students think should be marked. In students’ writing, different types of errors can be found, those regarding organization, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, etc., and teachers may need to learn how their students think about the types of errors that should be corrected. A study by Chen et al. [3] reported an interesting finding on these perceptions; the value of written corrective feedback was confirmed by English learners of different English proficiency levels. However, it was suggested in a study by Orts and Salazar [10] that students’ English proficiency did not significantly affect their preference for written corrective feedback.

3. Objectives of the study
1. To survey the students’ attitudes toward written corrective feedback.
2. To investigate the students’ perceptions and preferences of direct and indirect feedback.
3. To investigate the students’ perceptions and preferences of focused and unfocused feedback.
4. To survey the students’ opinions of the feedback on different types of errors.
4. Research methodology
The participants of the study were fourth-year English Major students, studying in the Faculty of Arts at Dhurakij Pundit University in Thailand in academic year 2017. These students have experienced many writing courses throughout their study years.

The data were collected from 51 students. Twenty students with a GPA higher than 3.00 were defined in this study as higher-achieving students while twenty students with a GPA lower than 2.50 were defined as lower-achieving students. Higher achievers were assumed to have higher English proficiency. The eleven other students were not defined according to their English achievement or proficiency.

A questionnaire was used for the data collection, and it was used to survey the students’ attitudes towards the teacher’s written corrective feedback in five major parts.
- Part 1 surveyed their overall attitudes toward written corrective feedback.
- Part 2 investigated their attitudes toward direct and indirect feedback.
- Part 3 investigated their attitudes toward focused and unfocused feedback.
- Part 4 asked the students to identify the types of errors that they thought needed to be marked by the teacher.
- Part 5 allowed the students to provide their opinions in open-ended questions.

Part 2 of the questionnaire was adapted from one part of a questionnaire in a study by Chen et al. [3], conducted at a university in China.

Part 3 and Part 4 of the questionnaire were adapted from two parts of a questionnaire in a study by Amrhein and Nassaji [4], conducted in English language schools in Canada.

The data from the questionnaire responses were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. The participants of the study were reported as “overall” students (all 51 students), “higher achievers” (20 students), and “lower achievers” (20 students).

5. Results and discussion
The results of the study gained from the students’ responses are presented and discussed in this section in five parts, in accordance with the five parts of the questionnaire.

5.1 Students’ overall attitudes toward the written corrective feedback
The results from Part 1 of the questionnaire show the students’ overall attitudes toward the written corrective feedback (Table 1), and it indicates the extent to which they believed that the feedback helped them to improve their English. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” was adopted for this part of the questionnaire. The results show a very positive attitude toward the feedback, with the average rating of 4.75.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes towards the teacher’s written corrective feedback</th>
<th>Overall (N = 51)</th>
<th>Higher achievers (N = 20)</th>
<th>Lower achievers (N = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The teacher’s feedback is essential.</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The teacher’s feedback helps improve my writing.</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The teacher’s feedback helps improve my knowledge of grammar.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the results, both the higher achievers and the lower achievers had positive perceptions—they believed that feedback is essential and can help them improve their English. This result confirms the results of a previous study by Chen et al. [3] in which the students showed positive opinions toward the written corrective feedback, with the average rating of 4.37.

5.2 Students’ attitudes toward direct and indirect feedback
The results from Part 2 of the questionnaire (Table 2) show the students’ attitudes toward direct and indirect feedback, and whether the students regard “direct feedback” or “indirect feedback” as more effective and whether they prefer “direct feedback” or “indirect feedback.” According to the results, most students regarded “Teacher locates the errors. Students correct them.” as most effective and they also preferred this type of feedback; the results suggest that they valued and perceived “indirect feedback” as more effective than “direct feedback.”

TABLE 2: Students’ attitudes toward direct and indirect feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ attitudes toward direct and indirect feedback</th>
<th>Overall (N = 51)</th>
<th>Higher achievers (N = 20)</th>
<th>Lower achievers (N = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you regard as the most effective?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher corrects the errors.</td>
<td>13 (25.49 %)</td>
<td>3 (15 %)</td>
<td>8 (40 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher locates the errors. Students correct them.</td>
<td>35 (68.63 %)</td>
<td>16 (80 %)</td>
<td>12 (60 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students locate and correct the errors.</td>
<td>3 (5.88 %)</td>
<td>1 (5 %)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you prefer most?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher corrects the errors.</td>
<td>17 (33.33 %)</td>
<td>4 (20 %)</td>
<td>9 (45 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher locates the errors. Students correct them.</td>
<td>32 (62.75 %)</td>
<td>15 (75 %)</td>
<td>11 (55 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students locate and correct the errors.</td>
<td>2 (3.92 %)</td>
<td>1 (5 %)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the results, 85% of the higher achievers valued and 80% prefer that students themselves correct the errors whereas a slightly lower percentage can be observed among lower achievers. It might be possible to assume that higher achievers tend to value and prefer “indirect feedback” more than lower achievers. The higher achievers in this study were assumed to have higher language proficiency. Thus, they tend to have more knowledge of the language and have greater ability to correct their own errors located by the teacher. Lower achievers or those with lower language proficiency have limited knowledge of the language, so they may feel that they will not be able to correct their own errors. Figure 1 shows the higher achievers’ and lower achievers’ attitudes toward direct and indirect feedback.
students in a Chilean university viewed indirect feedback as more useful as it encourages cognitive learning. However, fee helpful in improving their spelling, but they preferred direct feedback because it showed them the correct language forms and it was easier for them to understand the errors. The present results also contradict the results from Alshahrani and Storch’s study [13], which suggested that most students preferred direct feedback.

5.3 Students’ attitudes toward focused and unfocused feedback

The results from Part 3 of the questionnaire (Table 3) show the students’ attitudes toward focused and unfocused feedback. The students were asked to identify their perceptions and preferences regarding the amount of written corrective feedback that should be given by the teacher—all errors, some errors, or none of the errors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ attitudes toward focused and unfocused feedback</th>
<th>Overall (N = 51)</th>
<th>Higher achievers (N = 20)</th>
<th>Lower achievers (N = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you regard as the most effective?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark all errors.</td>
<td>26 (50.98 %)</td>
<td>8 (40 %)</td>
<td>11 (55 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark only major errors, but not minor ones.</td>
<td>8 (15.69 %)</td>
<td>5 (25 %)</td>
<td>2 (10 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark only the errors that interfere with communicating your ideas.</td>
<td>13 (25.49 %)</td>
<td>7 (35 %)</td>
<td>4 (20 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark no errors and respond only to the content.</td>
<td>4 (7.84 %)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (15 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you prefer most?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark all errors.</td>
<td>28 (54.90 %)</td>
<td>8 (40 %)</td>
<td>12 (60 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark only major errors, but not minor ones.</td>
<td>9 (17.65 %)</td>
<td>6 (30 %)</td>
<td>2 (10 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark only the errors that interfere with communicating your ideas.</td>
<td>11 (21.57 %)</td>
<td>5 (25 %)</td>
<td>5 (25 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher should mark no errors and respond only to the content.</td>
<td>3 (5.88 %)</td>
<td>1 (5 %)</td>
<td>1 (5 %)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About 50% of the students reported that they valued and preferred the option “Teacher should mark all errors.” Thus, whether the students valued and preferred comprehensive or selective marking (focused or unfocused feedback) cannot be confirmed. However, the lower achievers liked unfocused feedback more than the higher achievers. More than half of lower achievers in this study preferred that all errors be corrected. This may show that these students are concerned about improving their linguistic knowledge of the language.

Most of the higher achievers in this study did not prefer that all errors in their writing be corrected. This may be assumed that they do not expect their writing to be error-free. However, this result does not correspond with the results of a previous study by Amrhein and Nassaji [4], which also investigated the amount of feedback preferred by students and teachers, where most of the students (about 90%) preferred the teacher to mark all errors. Those students tended to aim at producing error-free pieces of writing.

5.4 Students’ opinions toward the types of errors

The results from Part 4 of the questionnaire (Table 4) suggest the types of error that the students thought needed to be marked by the teacher. According to the results, overall the feedback on organization errors and vocabulary errors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which types of errors do you think should be marked by the teacher?</th>
<th>Overall (N = 51)</th>
<th>Higher achievers (N = 20)</th>
<th>Lower achievers (N = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization errors</td>
<td>38 (74.51 %)</td>
<td>18 (90 %)</td>
<td>14 (70 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical errors</td>
<td>47 (92.16 %)</td>
<td>16 (80 %)</td>
<td>20 (100 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation errors</td>
<td>15 (29.41 %)</td>
<td>8 (40 %)</td>
<td>3 (15 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling errors</td>
<td>15 (29.41 %)</td>
<td>4 (20 %)</td>
<td>8 (40 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary errors</td>
<td>37 (72.55 %)</td>
<td>14 (70 %)</td>
<td>16 (80 %)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results confirm the results from a study by Alshahrani and Storch [13], which also showed that the participants considered that grammatical errors should be corrected, not language expressions or mechanics—more than half of the students preferred their teachers to give feedback on grammar. A study by Chen et al. [3] also revealed a similar finding; most students considered that organization errors should be corrected.

However, in the present study the higher achievers regarded feedback on organization errors as most essential, followed by feedback on grammatical errors and vocabulary errors, while lower achievers regarded feedback on grammatical errors as most essential, followed by feedback on vocabulary errors and organization errors.

As a summary of the results regarding the types of errors, a large majority of the students considered that errors in the use of grammar and vocabulary were major errors and should be marked. This may be because those errors interfere with the communication in their writing.
while punctuation errors and spelling errors may not. Organization errors were also viewed by
the students as a major type of error. They see the importance of organization because
particularly in writing classes students are often trained to write well-organized pieces of
writing. Poorly-organized writing can lead to readers’ confusion and frustration.

5.5 Data collected from the students’ answers through open-ended questions
Apart from the results in the tables presented earlier, some important data were collected
through the open-ended questions in Part 5 of the questionnaire. In those questions, the students
were asked to describe how they usually feel about the teacher’s feedback given in their writing
and to provide their opinions on how they prefer the feedback to be given by the teacher. Some
interesting insights gained from the data collected from the students’ answers through the open-ended
questions are as follows.

The students showed positive attitudes toward their teachers’ feedback. The feedback,
according to them, helped them to gain greater understanding of grammar and language forms,
and they were able to learn from their mistakes and avoid making the same mistakes again.
Further, the feedback helped them to identify their weak points or what they needed to improve.

Students also prefer some suggestions on how to correct those particular errors. They
sometimes have no idea how they can correct the errors by themselves. Some students
suggested that it would be even more helpful if some explanation of the errors were provided.

Many of the students preferred that the teacher talks to them after the written corrective
feedback is given—they felt that they needed to talk directly with the teacher, asking for more
explanation of the errors. They also preferred that the teacher helps develop their language,
focusing on the weak points found in their writing, and they wanted the teacher to explain more
about certain grammar points, for example. At this point, as suggested by Bitchener and Ferris
[14], one-on-one conferencing between the teacher and the student can be helpful in developing
their understanding of language use. This can also help contribute to a good relationship
between the teacher and the student. Good relationships between teachers and students should
not be overlooked; the teacher’s encouraging feedback can help promote students’
 improvement in writing [5].

6. Conclusion and recommendations
The present study suggests that written corrective feedback is valued by students overall. This
also suggests that students expect the teacher to provide feedback on their writing. Students
tend to believe that feedback can help them improve their writing and their English. Thus,
providing appropriate corrective feedback is suggested as one of the essential roles of the
teacher in EFL writing classes.

This study suggests that students tend to prefer “indirect feedback”—most of them preferred
that the teacher locate the errors, and the students correct the errors by themselves. The higher
achievers tended to prefer “indirect feedback” compared to the lower achievers. However,
whether the students preferred or valued “unfocused feedback” over “focused feedback” could
not be confirmed in this study.

Students in general tend to consider feedback on form-focused errors, grammar, and
vocabulary as very useful. Additionally, they see the importance of feedback for the
organization on their writing. This perception may reflect their perception of what constitutes
a good piece of writing.
Suggested by the results of the present study is how EFL learners in a Thai EFL context value and prefer the teacher’s written corrective feedback. Whether some types of feedback are more effective than others also has been widely discussed in recent studies. However, when giving written corrective feedback, the teacher may need to consider student differences in some important aspects, such as their levels of proficiency and their attitudes. Students’ attitudes should also be noted. Moreover, students’ motivation to learn from the teacher’s feedback may need to be encouraged so that students can gain the best benefits from the feedback in their writing.

Further studies may be conducted with a larger group of EFL learners in order to gain more conclusive results, and EFL learners’ perceptions of other aspects of written corrective feedback may also be surveyed.

7. References


