Critical Insights in Choosing Approaches to Feedback in Second Language (L2) Writing: Catering Individual Needs

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Abstract
Although there is a debate as to whether or not feedback in writing helps second language learners, this research indicates that learners improve in writing with having feedback from their instructors. However, in correcting learners' errors, especial care should be rendered to learners' individual needs as all the learners do not like a single approach to feedback. Apart from indicating the importance of feedback, in what this study contributes to the existing literature is the suggestion that learners' choice of the approaches to feedback varies more because of learners' 'individual needs' than their 'cultural differences'.
Key Words: Writing Errors, Formative Feedback, Summative Feedback, Direct Feedback, Indirect Feedback

1. Introduction

Despite the debate, feedback is viewed as 'crucial' both for motivating and strengthening language learning (Andertson 1982; Borphy 1981; Vygotsky 1978 in Hyland & Hyland 2006). Additionally, most research studies on L2 writing error correction suggest that students getting feedback from an instructor gradually improve in writing accuracy (Lin 2008).

Using a Mixed- Method approach, this paper aims at investigating into whether or not feedback from teachers helps learners address their writing errors. The research also examines how the language teachers may choose different approaches to feedback in addressing the errors students make in L2 writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feedback

According to Ur (1996, p.142), 'feedback is information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objectives of improving his performance'. The definition suggests the nature of feedback in language teaching that it facilitates language learning with a process of 'learn – perform - learn' rather than 'learn - perform' (Johnson 1988 & 1996).

Feedback has two components: 'assessment' and 'correction' (Ur 1996). An assessment merely informs students about their performance; as for example, a percentage grade on an exam would be one example, or the response 'No' to an attempted answer to a question in class; or a comment such as fair at the end of a written assignment (Ur 1996). Correction, on the other hand, provides students with some 'specific information' on 'aspects' of what the learners have done (Ur 1996). Correction involves information on what is correct and what is incorrect and also explains 'why'. (ibid, p.242).

2.2 Importance of Feedback

The importance of feedback increased with the emergence of 'learner-centred approaches' (Hyland & Hyland 2006). The 'process approach' encourages more teacher-student meetings around the text (ibid). Indeed, learners appreciate and expect feedback from their teacher (Ur 1996). In the 'process-based' learning, learners value teachers' 'scaffolding techniques' because they provide them with an increasing control over skills of composition (Hyland & Hyland 2006, p.1). Ferris and Hedgcock (1998), claim that L2 learners not only like teacher's 'positive feedback' but at the same time, they look forward to having 'constructive criticism' from their teacher on their work. According to Caroline and Corno (1981, in Ferris & Hedgcock 1998) only positive feedback, precisely at the rudimentary stage of learning may demotivate the learners. In addition, 'premature praise' might puzzle the

beginners and perhaps guide them to resent having low grades (ibid, p.135). Ferris (2002) claims that if learners do not have any kind of feedback from their teachers, they may get frustrated with their errors and also they may loose their confidence in their tutors. Ford (1992, p.210) maintains 'without feedback, motivational headquarter is effectively shut off from action…'. The aforesaid discussion suggests that feedback is indispensable if we are to help the learners address their errors in writing.

2.3 Different Approaches to Feedback
Feedback are mainly categorized into two groups: 'summative feedback' and 'formative feedback' (Hyland & Hyland 2006); Section 2.3.1 and section 2.3.2 present them in detail. Again formative feedback may be classified as direct or indirect; as for example, Ferris (2002) posits that a distinction is often made between 'direct feedback' and 'indirect feedback', further discussed in section, 2.4.

2.3.1 Summative Feedback
In summative feedback instructor evaluates the 'overall aspect' of a student's mastery of a language skill to determine how far the learner has learnt after the whole programme (Ur 1996). Hence, this kind of feedback is much more concerned with 'product' rather than 'process' (Hyland, & Hyland 2006). Ur (1996) claims that summative feedback may not be useful in addressing learners' language errors.

In traditional teaching method feedback was mainly summative. Before the emergence of 'process-oriented instruction', feedback was mainly 'straightforward' (Ferris & Hedgcock 1998) and in that 'traditional students-teacher relationship' learners are inclined to believe in the power of the instructor, while the instructors have the authority of their institution with them to either 'pass' or 'fail' the students (Hyland 2000, p. 34). Although summative feedback helps learners very 'little' to address their language errors (Ur 1996), still in many places; for example, in the present researchers' country, Bangladesh, students get mainly summative feedback from their teachers at the end of the exam.

It should be noted that this paper mainly concerns with the formative feedback and examines the extent to which it may help in addressing learners' L2 writing errors. Hence, we will not further our discussion on the summative feedback. The next section focuses on the formative feedback in details.

2.3.2 Formative Feedback
Formative feedback refers to a 'process' rather than a 'product' and it 'points forward to the student's future writing and development of his or her writing process' (Hyland & Hyland 2006, p.1). This kind of feedback suggests an 'ongoing correction and assessment' with the purpose of developing 'specific bits' of language produced by the learners (Ur 1996, p.244). Formative feedback may appear in two forms: direct and indirect feedback, to be discussed in 2.3.2.1.

2.3.2.1 Direct and Indirect Feedback
According to Ferris (2002), direct feedback refers to the system where a teacher provides learners with the 'correct' form to address their errors whereas in an 'indirect feedback' situation, teacher does not provide the learners with the correct form rather he just 'indicates' that an error has been occurred in the learners' production of the target language (TL) so that learners themselves can work it out and address it on their own (ibid). Indirect feedback may be provided through 'coding' and 'underlining', etc (Liang 2008).
As there are different approaches to feedback, it is important to examine which approaches ELT practitioners may consider in giving feedback to their students. Thus, it is imperative to investigate into some issues such as, how should teachers view learners' errors? When and how should they correct errors? And what kind of approaches to feedback is more effective in what situations?
However, although 'indirect feedback' makes learners more 'responsible' and autonomous, there are situations where teachers need to choose 'direct feedback' approach; for example, if the learners are beginners or if they belong to lower level of language proficiency, direct feedback can be more effective than indirect feedback (Ferris 2002).
2.4 Correcting Treatable Errors through Indirect Feedback

To decide which approach to choose in giving formative feedback, ELT practitioners also need to understand the nature of learners' errors as to whether they are 'treatable' or 'untreatable'. Treatable errors are those that are associated with 'linguistic structure' and that appears in a 'rule-governed way' (Ferris 2002). Example of treatable errors may be related to errors associated with 'subject-verb agreement', 'article usage', 'plural' etc. (ibid). ELT practitioners can provide indirect feedback to learners' treatable errors because according to Ferris (2002), indirect feedback is very useful to address learners' errors that are 'rule governed'.

Again, in correcting learners' treatable errors, indirect feedback can take two forms: 'coding' and 'underlining' (Lin 2008). In 'coded feedback', teachers provide the learners with some symbolic signs that indicate the kind of errors learners commit (Ferris 2002). For example, a teacher may write GR for grammar errors, or SP for spelling errors, etc. 'uncoded feedback', on the other hand, refers to the system in which teachers 'underline' or 'circle' the errors without explicitly mentioning in what learners have committed an error (Ferris 2002). It should be noted that in the methodological part of this research we separate 'coded feedback' from indirect genre. Hence, in analytical part we will treat 'code feedback' as a separate entity. By indirect feedback we will stick to 'underlining' and 'circling'.

In addition, ELT practitioners need to decide as to whether they will use 'coded' or 'underlined' indirect feedback, depending on the situation and context. 'coded feedback' may be very effective in a 'short-term' error correction process as it is less time consuming for the learners. However, Ferris & Robert (2001) in a study compared both the 'coded' and 'underlined' approaches of indirect feedback   and found that learners having feedback through both the approaches did somewhat better than those only having underlined feedback (in Lin 2008).

2.5 Correcting Untreatable Errors through Direct Feedback

'Untreatable errors' are those which are 'idiosyncratic'; hence, requiring learners' personal efforts to be addressed (Ferris 2002). For example, errors in 'word choice', 'idiomatic sentence structure', etc are 'untreatable errors' (ibid). Teachers can provide 'direct feedback' in this kind of errors. As untreatable errors are 'idiosyncratic' in nature, students can better address this kind of errors with direct feedback (Chaney 1999; Ferris 1999; Handrickson in Ferris 2002).

Therefore, in order to facilitate learners' L2 writing skill, ELT practitioners need to decide on various aforesaid issues while giving feedback to the learners' errors. Also, to find out the appropriate approaches to feedback, teachers need to 'interview' their students to know what kind of feedback they expect from their teachers (Ur 1996). Moreover, in providing feedback teachers should be very 'focused', and 'text-specific', rather than providing students with 'rubber-stumping vague perspective remarks' on their work (Ferris 1997, p.333).

3.   Research Method

As mentioned in section 1, the objective of this research is to explore the usefulness of feedback in L2 writing. In so doing, we also examine several approaches to feedback that practitioners adopt in treating learners' errors. We use a Mixed-Method (Quantitative and Qualitative) approach to address the following research questions:

- Does feedback motivate students to address their second language (L2) writing errors?
- What are the approaches to feedback that TESOL practitioners can take to facilitate L2 writing?

3.1 Population

In this project, the participants are both the TESOL practitioners and L2 learners. Two TESOL practitioners and ten ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) learners were sampled for the study. The practitioners practice ELT at the University of Essex, UK and they are British and native speakers of English. The ten L2 learners, however, hailed from different nationalities; such as, Saudi Arabia, Spain, France, Turkey, and Austria and also they belong to different proficiency level and to four different courses, for example,   Preparatory English Programme   (PEP), General English, MA in TESOL, MA in ELT and MA in TEFL   at the aforesaid university.

3.2 Instruments and Empirical Techniques

In this research we use a survey strategy. The survey instruments included two semi-structured interviews with the two aforesaid TESOL practitioners (cf, 3.1) and a questionnaire to ten ESOL learners at the University of Essex (cf, 3.1).

The Questionnaire was devised mainly to produce quantitative data while the interviews were intended in collecting

qualitative data.

The questionnaire data are analysed using SPSS. The variables; such as, 'Agree', 'Strongly agree', 'Disagree', 'Strongly Disagree', and 'Don't know' are coded numerically as, 1,2,3…5 for analyzing them using SPSS. The interviews are first of all transcribed and then coded following Richard's (2003) model. In the interview data analysis procedures, the interviewees are termed as T1 and T2. The results of both the questionnaire and interview data analysis were discussed together so that the data from both the sources could be compared as a means of triangulation.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section is divided into three parts. Section 4.1 presents and discusses the results of the quantitative data analysis while section 4.2 presents the results of interview (Qualitative) data analysis.   Section 3 summarizes the main findings of the research.

4.1 Questionnaire (Quantitative) Data Analysis

4.1.1 (Q1) Approaches to Feedback: Descriptive Statistics

In response to Q1, we find approximately 38% L2 learners prefer to have 'direct correction' of their L2 writing errors while about 31% ESL learners like 'indirect correction'. Another 31% learners think 'use of codes' is the best approach to L2 writing error correction, compared to 0% respondents for 'peer correction'. Interestingly, the responses for Q1 by the respondents from the same country also vary (for example, three respondents from Saudi Arabia like three different approaches to their L2 writing Errors feedback).

From the overall assessment, respondents' responses to Q1 vary significantly. From figure 1 (See appendix-1), we notice that there is a lack of consistency in the results; for example, the mean shows a tendency towards the variable 2. However, the mode is 1.00. Also, the standard deviation is also very large which suggests that the responses vary from one another. The statistics thus indicates that not a single approach to feedback may be claimed to be absolutely appropriate for all the learners rather teachers need to apply different approaches to feedback based on the needs and the choice of the learners.

4.1.2 (Q2): Importance of L2 Writing Error Correction: Descriptive Statistics

In a response to Q2, more respondents are likely to acknowledge that learners may be discouraged with their L2 writing errors if they do not have any feedback from their ESL teachers. Significant number of (75%) respondents (22.5% strongly agree and 52.5% agree) believe that ESL learners should have feedback from their teachers to address their L2 writing errors. Also, the Mean: 2.00, Median: 2.00 and Mood: 2.00, indicate maximum tendency towards the second variable: 'Agree', signifying that learners appreciate writing error correction. However, 25% (12.5% strongly disagree and 12.5% disagree) respondents consider ESL learners are not frustrated with their L2 errors even if they do not have any feedback from their teachers (See, Figure 2 in appendix-2)

4.1.3 (Q3): Positive Feedback: Descriptive Statistics

Most L2 learners tend to believe that positive feedback motivates them to address their writing errors. For example, 75% (16% strongly agree and 59% agree) learners think that positive feedback helps them correct their errors autonomously, compared to 12.5% of learners who do not agree with the belief. Other 12.5% learners respond as 'don't know' to Q3 (See Figure 3 in appendix-3). Statistically, there is a tendency towards the variable '2' that is 'Agree'. Also, the Mean is 2.30, Median is 2.00 and Mode is 2.00. Thus, it can be suggested that positive feedback is useful in motivating learners to correct their errors.

4.1.4 (Q4): Negative Feedback: Descriptive Statistics

In response to Q4 63% L2 learners think that negative feedback demotivates learners to address their writing errors whereas 37% learners do not believe in that. As for the statistical significance, there is a clear tendency to the variable, '2', that is 'Agree'. The Mean is 2.20, Median is 2.00 and Mode is 2.00 indicating that negative feedback demotivates the learners address their errors (See, Figure 4 in appendix-4).

4.2 Analysis of the interview (Qualitative) data

4.2.1 Importance of Correcting ESL Learners' Errors in Writing
Both the TESOL practitioners (T1 and T2) consider feedback as an important matter in English as a second language (ESL) writing. For example, T1 remarks:

> '... ***of course*** *you still have to point out mistakes they (students) need to work on.'*

Similarly, T2 also believes that students ought to know where they are committing mistakes so that they can work on them. In correcting L2 learners' errors, he says:

> '*The idea behind this is to let the students know that they have made a mistake'.*

According to T2, as a result of feedback in L2 writing ESL learners' overall writing improves. He opines:

> *'hopefully, the idea is when they go home and write down all the*
> *mistakes they have made on a piece of paper and rewrite it and send*
> *the second and the final draft, what I find is that yes there are still one or two*
> *mistakes but overall their writing has improved.'*

4.2.2 Approach to Feedback
Both the interviewees (T1 and T2) use codes as a means to provide feedback to L2 learners' writing errors. As for example they claim:

> '*I use a little bit of codes' (T1)*
> '*I like to use error correction codes' (T2).*

4.2.3 Importance of knowing Learners' Individual Needs
In providing L2 learners with feedback in their L2 writing errors, T1 tries to analyse a learner individually according to his/her learning needs not based on what culture the learner hails from. T1 remarks:

> '*I tend to work out what an individual like as opposed to what culture they are from.'*

4.2.4 Learners' Response to Feedback
Both the teachers (T1 and T2) think that the L2 learners they teach, have a positive response on teachers' feedback to their errors. However, as for T1, he claims he has one or two students who are a bit 'sensitive' to criticism. Yet overall, their students respond positively to their feedback. For example, T2 claims:

> '*they like it (error correction) because what I am doing is I am pinpointing what their*
> *mistake is'.*

4.2.5 Learner-Demotivation
According to both T1 and T2, too many errors correction may be demotivating for the learners. T1 thinks that students should be given positive feedback with sufficient words because he thinks that *'minimal feedback'* may discourage L2 learners to address their errors. Hence, T1 claims, '*…you need to find a balance between encouragement and* constructive *criticism.'*   T2 also believes, teachers should not correct every single writing error of L2 learners. He remarks:

> '*if you correct   e-v-e-r-y, e-v-e-r-y, e-v-e-r-y (with emphasis)*
> *single..um..error and cover all the paper in red,*
> *I think that is extremely demotivating'*

4.3 Summary of the Findings
The results of this research indicate that most participants (both L2 learners and TESOL practitioners) think that feedback in L2 writing errors is important for learners to address their errors. However, this study also suggests that sometimes feedback, especially when it is negative, or minimal, or too much corrective, may demotivate the learners. The study further shows that L2 learners have different views on the approaches to receive feedback in their writing (Some like coding, some direct correction, some others indirect correction) although the teachers in this research are mainly found to provide feedback through the use of codes. It indicates a mismatch between what teachers think and what learners' like; this again suggests a need for teacher training in addressing the issues of teachers' feedback to learners' errors. Finally, it is worthy to note that three respondents from Saudi Arabia like three different approaches to feedback, indicating that analyzing learner's individual needs is more important than his cultural identity.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications
The findings of the research indicate that teachers' feedback to learners' L2 writing errors is important. We, the

TESOL practitioners, teach to bring about 'desirable changes' in the learners. It is felt that there must be a 'feedback mechanism' through which a teacher observes the teaching-learning activities. Alausa (2010), holds 'such a mechanism should provide the teacher with information on how the learners are receiving his or her teaching and determine whether or not the environment is conducive for teaching and learning to take place'.

Teachers, however, need to choose their approaches to feedback by studying learners' temperament so that there is a successful negotiation between the teacher and the learners. Based on the findings in this project, it may be implied that in providing feedback if the learners are not consulted and if their preferable approaches to feedback is not examined, there is likely to be a mismatch between the way teachers correct the writing errors and the way learners like it.

Another implication of this research is that feedback should be balanced between positive encouragement and constructive criticism. Neither positive feedback nor negative feedback alone may be useful in helping the learners address their errors and improve their writing quality. Finally, the study implies, apart from answering the main questions, that analyzing learners' individual needs is more important than their cultural identities. We the teachers need to analyze what approach to feedback a particular learner likes most regardless of what culture he hails from.

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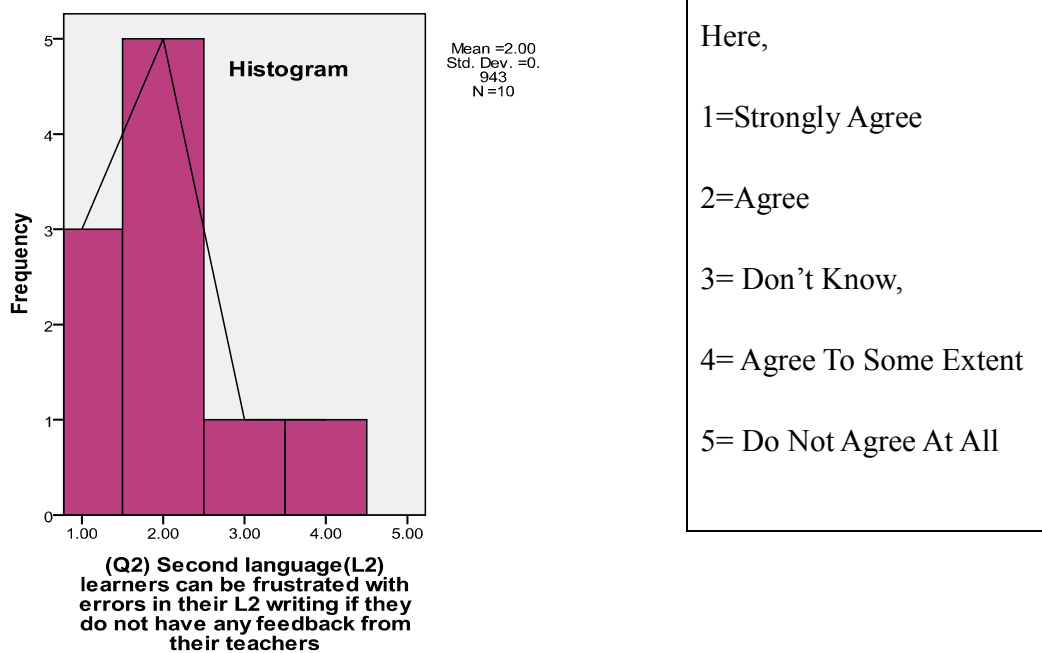
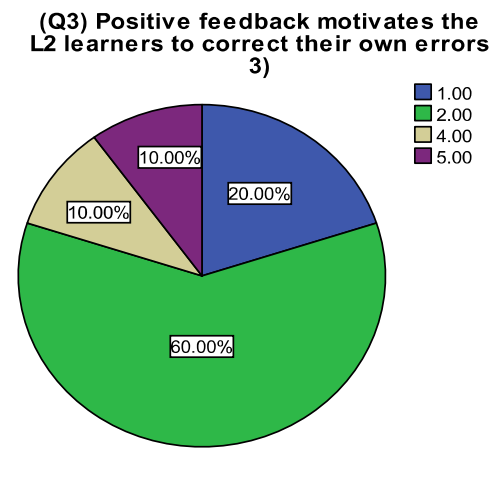# Appendix I

Figure 1: The best Approach to Feedback

Here,

1=Direct Feedback

2=Indirect Feedback

3= Don't Know,

4= Use of Codes,

5= Peer Feedback
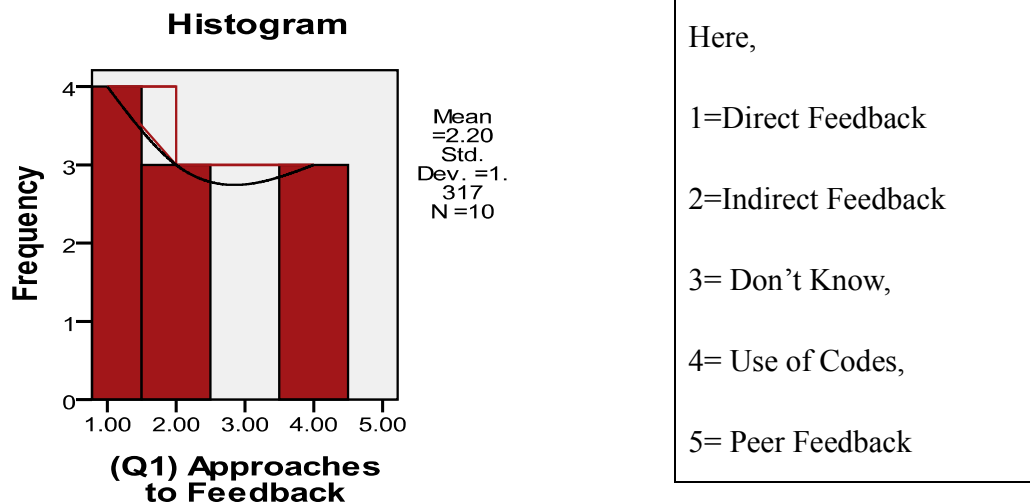
Appendix II

Figure 2: Importance of Error Correction in L2 Writing

Here,

1=Strongly Agree

2=Agree

3= Don't Know,

4= Agree To Some Extent

5= Do Not Agree At All

Appendix III

Figure 3 Positive Feedback

(Q3) Positive feedback motivates the L2 learners to correct their own errors 3)

- 1.00
- 2.00
- 4.00
- 5.00

10.00%

20.00%

10.00%

60.00%
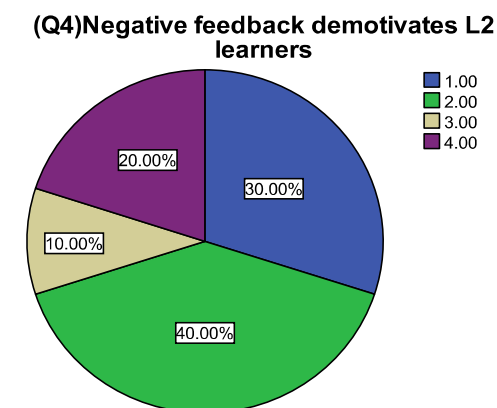
Here,

1=Strongly Agree

2=Agree

3= Don't Know,

4= Agree To Some Extent

5= Do Not Agree At All

Appendix IV

Figure 4: Negative Feedback

(Q4)Negative feedback demotivates L2 learners

- 1.00
- 2.00
- 3.00
- 4.00

20.00%

30.00%

10.00%

40.00%

Here,

1=Strongly Agree

2=Agree

3= Don't Know,

4= Agree To Some Extent

5= Do Not Agree At All