



Providing written corrective feedback in IELTS writing task 2: EFL teachers' practices

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Abstract

Written corrective feedback (WCF) is viewed as a strategy to improve students' writing quality, so it is a pivotal part in teaching writing skills. The aim of this study is to delve into how EFL teachers used WCF in IELTS writing courses at five English language centers in Buon Ma Thuot City, Vietnam. Thirty teachers in charge of IELTS courses in these English language centers answered the questionnaire, ten of them took part in the interviews, and 100 essays were collected for textual analysis. The findings showed that more comprehensive feedback than selective feedback was used by the teachers although most of them believed that the use of the focus-based feedback is compatible with students' level and the course's aims. In terms of the clarity of feedback, furthermore, the teachers tended to provide direct feedback rather than indirect and meta-linguistic feedback to facilitate learners' error correction.

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Introduction

Truscott (1996) defines written corrective feedback (WCF) as the "correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student's ability to write accurately" (p. 329). In other words, it relates to teachers' written feedback on students' essays to improve the accuracy in terms of grammar (e.g., spelling, punctuation, tenses, etc.) and lexical resource while Juvenale (2016) identified WCF as teachers' written comments on the content and form of a student's essay. Educators have

made great efforts to discover different aspects regarding WCF for teachers' professional development such as the effectiveness of WCF (Ferris, 2007), feedback provision depending on students' level (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009), feedback types (Lee, 2004), and the choice of comprehensive or selective corrective feedback (Sheen, 2007).

In respect of the categorization of WCF, Ellis (2008) introduced a variety of WCF including direct, indirect, meta-linguistic, focused, unfocused, electronic corrective feedback are addressed in research. However, only five common types of WCF classified into two main themes are mentioned in this study. The first theme concerning the clarity of feedback contains direct, indirect, and meta-linguistic feedback while the second theme relating to the focus of feedback consists of selective and comprehensive feedback.

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Methodology

Research Sites

The study focused on the teachers teaching IELTS writing in five English language centers in Buon Ma Thuot City – a mountainous city in the central highland of Vietnam. The research aimed to discover the practices of providing WCF in IELTS classes, so English language centers selected for the research had to offer IELTS courses. The centers are well-equipped with teaching facilities which support classroom activities conducted by teachers. The centers have an average of ten IELTS classes per month. The quite small class size of around 10 has provided teachers and learners with room for interaction and feedback giving.

Participants

The participants of this research were thirty teachers who were in charge of IELTS classes at the five English language centers in Buon Ma Thuot City. In particular, six teachers in each center were selected based on the convenience sampling method, i.e., they were willing to take part in the study as participants at their convenience. The average age of teachers in the survey was approximately 29 years old, and the average year of English teaching was five years. The participants were all qualified with at least Bachelor's degree in English language studies. In the survey, 66.7 percent of the teachers had obtained Bachelor's degree and 33.3 percent of them held Master's degree. The level of IELTS classes taught by these participants was mainly at the intermediate level, followed by advanced and elementary level. Noticeably, only half of the teachers were trained on WCF, with the length of the course of 3.5 weeks.

Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire which was adapted from Lee's (2004) questionnaire because of a similar research focus included two sections: The first section related to the teachers' background information about gender, age, and teaching experience; the second section included six items which were to explore teachers' WCF practices. The questions were designed with a 5-point Likert scale for levels of frequency (i.e., never, rarely, sometimes, often, always). The participants spent about five minutes completing the questionnaire. In order to avoid any

language-related misunderstandings, it was translated into Vietnamese language before being given to the surveyed teachers.

Semi-structured interview

Ten teachers who were teaching the IELTS courses in the five English language centers voluntarily joined the individual interviews aiming to identify their corrective feedback practices. The interview questions were adapted from Pearson's (2018) study. The researcher explored the teacher's types of corrective feedback by combining them with the data collected from the textual analysis and questionnaire. Additionally, the results from the interview were used to find out and explain the teachers' practices relating to WCF. Individual interviews, which lasted about twenty-five minutes, were conducted for the sake of the interviewees' convenience. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language so that the interviewees could fully express their opinions. After that, the researchers translated the transcript into English language and cross-checked the translated versions.

Learners' essays

The use of the document analysis indicates how WCF was used by the teachers, which is another source of data besides the data gained from the interview and questionnaire. After getting the students' consent, 100 essays with ten teachers' corrective feedback were conveniently collected from the latest IELTS classes that they were teaching. Two teachers were invited to analyze the essays and double-check the results to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Prior to the main study, all the instruments were piloted with three teacher participants and three essays written by learners in one of the five selected English language centers. It is worth noting that these participants and essays were excluded from the main study. Concerning the data collection procedure for the main study, the questionnaire was first administered to 30 teachers in charge of IELTS classes. Then, ten individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at the interviewees' convenience. The interviewees were coded from T1 to T10. Finally, 100 essays were collected with the permission of EFL learners who attended the ten interviewed teachers' IELTS classes. The essays were coded from E1 to E100.

As for the data analysis, content analysis including three steps of familiarizing and organizing, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting was used to

analyze the qualitative data garnered from the interviews, and descriptive statistics was employed for processing the quantitative data collected from both the questionnaire and essays.

Results

Teachers' Practices on Written Corrective Feedback

The results from the questionnaire showed that there are six items addressing frequency in using strategies to give WCF.

As observed in Table 1, all of the strategies were applied by the teachers. They used various types of feedback including coded, direct and indirect, but the most commonly used feedback was direct WCF, which means that the teacher directly corrects their students' error (item 1: $M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.92$). Teachers sometimes indicated errors (with or without the help of marking codes) but did not correct them (item 2: $M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.98$ and item 4: $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.26$). The practice of indicating errors with the help of marking codes and correcting them at the same time was least preferred by teachers (item 3: $M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.44$). In terms of the extent of WCF, teachers preferred correcting all errors that appeared in students' IELTS writing (item 5: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 11.3$) rather than selectively correcting errors in an essay (item 6: $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.37$).

The findings from the essay analysis indicated that the teachers provided a considerable amount of written corrective feedback to their learners. Approximately three-quarters of students' errors were marked with direct feedback, which constituted the largest proportion in the total of corrective marks (Figure 1). Additionally, in the total of 661 direct feedback marks, there were only 3 errors supplemented with correction codes (Figure 2). The number of meta-linguistic feedback marks only took up 16 percent of the total marks (Figure 4), followed by 10 percent of indirect feedback marks (Figure 3).

Meanwhile, most of the interviewees admitted using direct feedback, while meta-linguistic feedback was applied by few interviewees. The use of meta-linguistic feedback is demonstrated as follows:

I underline and ask them if there are any other alternatives. For grammar sections, if they are not correct in the word choices, I write (n), (v) or (adj) next to their errors and require them to rewrite. If it is a single sentence, I underline it and mark number 1. (T5)

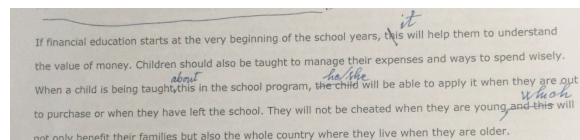


Figure 1 Example of direct feedback (E3)

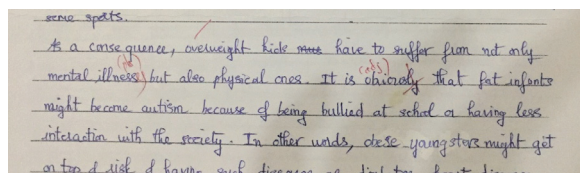


Figure 2 Example of direct feedback with marking codes (E78)

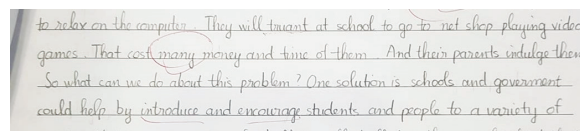


Figure 3 Example of indirect feedback (E54)

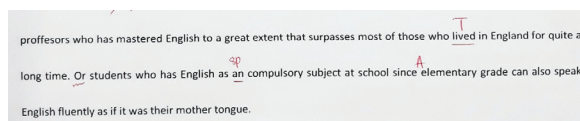


Figure 4 Example of meta-linguistic feedback (E25)

Table 1 The frequency in the use of each type of WCF

Item	The frequency in the use of each type of WCF	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	I identify errors and correct them.	3.93	0.92
2	I identify errors, but I do not correct them.	3.27	0.98
3	I identify errors, classify them (by means of a marking code), and correct them.	2.70	1.44
4	I identify errors and classify them (by means of a marking code), but I do not correct them.	3.07	1.26
5	I identify all errors that appear in their writing.	3.40	1.13
6	I identify only a few specific types of errors that appear in their writing.	3.17	1.37

According to the interview results, half of the teachers shared that they combined different strategies depending on the students' level of proficiency. For advanced-level students, for example, T3 circled the mistakes to let them notice their mistakes and correct them on their own while she corrected mistakes made by lower achievers directly.

As regards to the extent of feedback, 65 percent of the total essays were corrected comprehensively, which was almost double the number of essays corrected by the selective strategy (35%). Qualitatively, only three out of ten teachers in the interview reported that they preferred comprehensive feedback. T3 explained that "My students want me to give as much feedback as possible. They even feel unhappy when I do not correct for them." As teachers, they wish to be perfect in the students' eyes; therefore, they did not want to leave any mistakes unmarked. T4 emphasized, "I even remind them of the smallest mistakes many times so that they don't make these mistakes again when taking an actual IELTS test." The criteria of IELTS writing was the reason for T1's choice of comprehensive feedback. He stated that all four criteria were equally scored; therefore, it was essential to focus on every error from all aspects.

However, the remaining informants thought that selective feedback should take priority over comprehensive feedback. One of the reasons was that the teachers wanted their students to gradually improve their mistakes. Three teachers, including T5, T7, and T9 believed that the amount of error correction should depend on students' level and their expected score. According to T5, "Some errors were acceptable in the criteria of a specific band score. That is why I only focus on errors that will definitely lower their targeted scores."

Discussion

The Focus of The Feedback: The Preference for Comprehensive Feedback Over Selective Feedback

The results showed that teachers tended to use the comprehensive strategies rather than selective strategies, which was in line with other previous studies' findings (Evans et al., 2010; Lee, 2008). To explain this tendency, several teachers in the interview asserted that teachers were responsible for correcting all mistakes made by students in their essays. Moreover, students' expectation for all mistakes to be corrected was also a factor affecting teachers' feedback practices. According to Hairston (1986, as cited in Lee, 2008), due to the conventional perception that the more WCF are given, the better

teachers are, teachers are inclined to correct all students' mistakes.

Surprisingly, when asked to choose between selective and comprehensive feedback, only a few interviewed teachers who attended the three-and-a-half-week training expressed their inclination to correct students selectively, i.e., they focused on serious mistakes rather than every single mistake. This finding is in agreement with Nguyen and Le's (2017) findings, in which teachers claimed that only major errors should be corrected. Besides, they suggested that teachers should pay more attention to idea-related errors as the quality of students' works was significantly attributed to ideas.

The Clarity of Feedback: Higher Frequency of Direct Feedback Than Indirect and Meta-Linguistic Feedback

The results of this study indicate various uses of WCF types. Overall, direct WCF received the most priority from teachers as the number of mistakes corrected by teachers took up the largest proportion of the total corrective feedback points. Moreover, according to the questionnaire, direct feedback was more prevalent than the other types. The findings are quite similar to those in several previous studies (e.g., Evans et al., 2010; Mahmud 2016; Pearson, 2018). According to Pearson (2018), teachers should correct errors directly in order not to "distract learners from higher-order IELTS-related textual issues, particularly Task Response" (p. 23).

Although the participants did not use indirect and meta-linguistic feedback as frequently as direct feedback, they were aware of the considerable importance of indirect feedback and meta-linguistic feedback (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Sheen, 2010). In terms of indirect feedback, some teachers recognized its benefits that these types of WCF help raise students' awareness of their grammatical and lexical mistakes and enhance students' self-correction ability. In the Vietnamese EFL context, Pham and Iwashita (2017) showed the improvement in students' accuracy significantly through indirect feedback because students had an opportunity to correct grammatical, morphological, and syntactic mistakes. More importantly, indirect feedback required students' critical thinking, great efforts, and involvement in the writing process, which have substantially developed learner autonomy. However, indirect feedback should be used according to students' level of proficiency because low-level students do not gain sufficient language knowledge to recognize their own mistakes (Liu, 2008). In fact, the surveyed teachers suggested using it for immediate to advanced learners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The mixed-methods research was employed to scrutinize teachers' practices in giving WCF to their students' essays in IELTS writing classes. There was a combination of three research instruments including the questionnaire, interview, and 100 essays produced by students in the IELTS writing courses. It was found out that most of the teachers in the survey gave more priority in comprehensive WCF, which means that they provided WCF on every mistake in students' essays; however, they still believed the importance of giving selective feedback and suggested choosing an appropriate approach based on students' level and purpose of the course. As regards the use of WCF types, the teachers were far more interested in direct WCF than indirect and meta-linguistic WCF. It is hoped that the preliminary findings of this study may bring theoretical and practical contributions to EFL teaching and learning, particularly teaching IELTS writing at the research sites and similar EFL contexts.

Based on the findings, there are some implications drawn for administrators at English language centers and EFL teachers. Firstly, as reported earlier, only half of the teachers were trained to use WCF. Therefore, more training and workshops relating to approaches to WCF should be available for teachers to help them gain better understanding of WCF. Secondly, due to the importance of feedback, there should be a guideline including techniques and procedures for teachers to apply WCF properly.

Regarding limitations of the study, the small sample size (i.e., 30 teachers in 5 centers) and the limited research area (i.e., IELTS writing task 2) may be the most significant. To enlarge the sample size, therefore, further research should be conducted at universities or colleges where there are more lecturers teaching IELTS writing skills. It is also recommended that future researchers should investigate WCF in IELTS writing task 1 for the sake of IELTS test takers and EFL teachers.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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