The Role of Teachers' Written Feedback on Students' Writing Performance: The Case of Third Year University Students

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Abstract:

The present study investigates students' perceptions toward the role of their teachers' written feedback on their writing performance. A questionnaire was administered to 90 third year English language students at Setif2 University. The study found that the students have positive attitudes toward the written feedback. Moreover, they believe that the written feedback is important and beneficial to improve students' writing performance. Another finding is that students want their teachers to use the indirect feedback to correct the writing errors. Based on these findings few pedagogical implications and recommendations were offered.

Keywords:

Corrective feedback, spelling errors, students' perceptions, written corrective feedback, writing performance.

Résumé :

La présente étude porte sur les perceptions des étudiants à l'égard de la rétroaction écrite. Elle vise à examiner les commentaires écrits de l'enseignant. Un questionnaire a été administré à 90 étudiants de troisième année en langue anglaise à l'Université de Sétif-2. L'étude a conclu que les étudiants ont des attitudes positives envers les correctifs écrits. De plus, les étudiants croient que la

rétroaction écrite corrective est importante et bénéfique pour développer la performance des étudiants en écriture. Une autre constatation importante est que les élèves veulent que les enseignants utilisent la rétroaction indirecte pour corriger leurs erreurs d'écriture. Sur la base de ces résultats, quelques implications pédagogiques et recommandations ont été présentées.

Mots clés :

Rétroaction corrective, rétroaction corrective écrite, performance de l'écriture, faute d'orthographe, perceptions des étudiants.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

One of the objectives of teaching and learning English is to enable students to communicate in English both in spoken and written language which can be achieved through mastering the four language skills (listing, reading, speaking, and writing). All of the skills are important for better command of English language. However, the one that helps the students to be more productive and creative is the writing skill. Writing is a combination of processes where the writer expresses the ideas, beliefs, experiences, thoughts, and feelings, supported by sufficient language components such as grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. For the case of beginner writer, this complicated skill requires some guidance by teachers through providing a feedback on a wide range of issues. Students might address the text's content, the way in which ideas are presented and organized, and the appropriateness of the vocabulary that is used.

During the learning process, feedback can be provided in a variety of forms (verbal/written text), by different people, and in many types including the explanation of the correct answer. However, the type of feedback that has received

most of the researchers' attention is feedback on writing which has been commonly referred to an error correction. Corrective feedback is an indication to the learners' use of the target language is incorrect (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

There have been several ongoing debates among researchers recently on whether or not students benefit from written corrective feedback on their writing. Truscott (1996) holds that feedback is neither effective nor useful. In fact, he argues that error correction is not only ineffective in improving students' writing; but also harmful.

Writing in a foreign language is generally difficult as learners are facing new rules and systems that sometimes differ from their own mother tongue the thing that makes it hard for them to write accurately. This is the case of third year English students at Setif 2 University, after analyzing the answers of some teachers on a pre-questionnaire we have found that the students make different types of errors in their paragraphs, and writing errors are classified as a first common errors made by students.

According to the teachers that we have asked, the best way to help students to improve their writing is to correct their errors, or in another word to provide them with a corrective feedback and the group of teachers all agreed that it is an effective way to improve students' academic writing abilities.

However, the way to present the corrective feedback and its usefulness has not received teachers' agreement on one hand. On the other hand, these answers are based on the opinions of teachers, but what about learners, do they really believe in the effectiveness of the written feedback? In this research some light is shed on the role of written feedback in relation to the perspectives and the

attitudes of both teachers and students concerning the effectiveness of such a feedback.

The main purpose of this research is to investigate whether written feedback is adopted by teachers in the university context. The peripheral purpose of this research is to include the current role and reactions of learners towards written feedback on the writing performance. To achieve the proposed goal, two research questions have been addressed in this study

1. What are the perceptions of third year English students regarding written feedback?

2. To what extent does the use of written feedback help third year English students master correct word spelling?

2. Literature Review

The role of written feedback in the writing performance is an important aspect of foreign language learning. Written feedback is crucial for learners and teachers since it represents one of the most frequently debated areas of foreign language and it focuses on the most common errors and mistakes in order to prevent their occurrence in the future. This section deals with written feedback, writing performance as well as the relationship between them.

2. 1. Written Corrective Feedback

Written Corrective feedback is a technique utilized by teachers to attract students' attention to erroneous parts to lead to modified output (Mikiko, 2004). The most frequently used definition of written corrective feedback is the one provided by Lightbown and Spada (1999), who defined it as "any indication to the learners that his or her use of the target language is incorrect"(p.172).

Thus, corrective feedback is a feedback that focuses on correction, or in other words is the teachers' cues to the learners to indicate that there is an error

that should be corrected. Correction is important for students and teachers. On the one hand, it gives the learner the opportunity to become aware of his/her errors because it draws the attention to the error and makes the learner aware that the correction is needed and that the utterance is not correct. According to Long, Inagaki & Ortega (1998) corrective feedback is closely related to language improvement because it gives learners chances to see the difference between their input and output. On the other hand, it gives the teacher the opportunity to see how his/her teaching methods work, and to see in which way learners learn and which areas of their language knowledge have to be improved.

The first type of corrective feedback is known as direct corrective feedback. This type refers to the feedback provided explicitly with the correct form for the students. It indicates that the students make an incorrect form and the correction is provided in a place of the errors. Ellis (2008) argued that direct corrective feedback has a benefit as it offers the learners explicit direction how to revise their errors.

The second type of corrective feedback is known as indirect corrective feedback. It refers to the feedback provided implicitly for the students. It indicates that the student makes an incorrect form by providing notification, yet the correct form is not provided. The notification of the incorrect ones is commonly presented by making circles on the errors. It also might be presented by making a note in the margin next to the line without pointing out the exact location of an error (Ellis, 2008).

This method may demand error correction especially with low level of proficiency. The third type of corrective feedback is known as metalinguistic corrective feedback. This type refers to the provision of feedback in a form of a linguistic clue or explicit comment on the targeted error(s). It indicates that when

students make an error, they are provided a clue on the way of correcting errors. In providing the feedback, the teachers might use the error codes abbreviated labels .Then, the errors are numbered and the metalinguistic explanations of the errors are available at the bottom of the text. To conclude, teachers' written corrective feedback and the learners' writing performance are two fundamental elements for Foreign Language learning.

2. 1. Writing Performance:

Writing is a combination of letters that represent the word as it is defined by NTC's Pocket dictionary of words and phrases as "the act, the practice, the ability, or the subject of forming words with letters in a right order, it is mostly related to the orthography".

Errors and mistakes are two different words that bear the same or similar meaning. However, there are appropriate ways to use the words and this often depends on the context. A mistake is when someone does not possess enough knowledge as Day, Chenoweth, Chun and Luppescu (1984) states that a student fall in mistakes because of many causes as follows "a mistake is made by a learner when writing or speaking is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or other aspects of performance". However, an error is usually made due to the lack of knowledge. The term error is more suitable for more formal contexts, while mistake is used more extensively in casual conversations (Day et al, 1984). Mistakes are not considered as a problem or as an obstacle for the success of the learning process; because it is considered as performance problems and it can be overcome with little effort made by the students.

• **Linguistic Errors:** Generally they are made by EFL students that include different areas like grammar errors and morpho-syntactic errors. These kinds of errors have a negative effect on the students' writing process (Lee, 1990).

• **Discourse Errors:** they are made by students on their conversations or on their piece of writing because they get the meaning lost. This kind should be corrected by teachers in order to help learners to speak fluently and to write accurately, however, Hendrickson (1981) claimed that "pedagogy needs to be related to modes of linguistic presentation".

• **Common Errors:** Another type of errors is common error which can be detected easily, because it affects a large number of students, the same error is made by the majority of the students such as prepositional errors. According to Lee (1990) "common errors may be due either to the complexity of the English language system itself or to first language interference".

• **High Frequency Errors:** The last type of errors is high frequency errors which are considered by Allwright and Bailey (1991) to deserve special priority attention in error correction since it indicates repeated occurrence of the same error on the part of an individual student.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design:

The current study follows an exploratory design. It relies on the quantitative approach for data collection. An exploratory research design intends to explore the research questions. It is used to define and clarify the nature of the problem. An exploratory research is not used to provide final solutions to existing problems. It enables us to have better comprehension of the problem.

3.2. Population and Sampling:

The target population in this study is third year undergraduate students of University of Setif2, Algeria. The researchers chose this population because

students are at critical stage in which they start producing written pieces particularly paragraphs and essays, thus, students are more likely to make errors. Consequently teachers' provision of written corrective feedback is highly needed at this level.

Researchers needed to get data from a small group or subset of all the population in which the information gained must be representative of the whole population. This small group is called a "sample". Following this method of sampling, the researcher takes (1/5) from the whole target population. The total number of the population in our case is 450 third year students, the sample then is 90 when dividing the entire population number on five which means that 90 students are representing the whole population.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected through a questionnaire during the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year in the Department of English language and literature, Faculty of Arts and Literature, Setif-2 University. Concerning the questionnaire, the researchers began with a pilot study to examine whether any items were problematic or not. Six questions were removed because they elicited similar responses to those elicited by other questions, and participants had commented that the questionnaire was too long. The final version of the questionnaire contains seventeen questions. The administration of the questionnaire lasted one full week.

4. Results: Analyses and Interpretations

1. Students' preferences to write in the EFL classroom

The first question is a yes/no in which students have to tick in the yes or no. Table 1 showed that 49 students have answered that they like writing in the

classroom, whereas 41 students stated that they do not like writing in the classroom.

Table 1: Students' preferences in writing

Type of Answers	AF	RF
Yes	49	54,4%
No	41	45,6%
Total	90	100%

Another portion of the students have a positive attitude towards writing in classroom, but in the same time we cannot ignore 41 students who stated the opposite. The latter may be one of the reasons behind making the students achieve less progress in their writing.

2. Students' possible difficulties in writing

The second question is an open ended question in which the researchers sought to get deeply into the students obstacles they may face while writing. The question yielded a verity of answers, but the majority of students suffer from vocabulary, grammar especially tenses, and spelling (vocabulary 52 students, grammar 49 students, spelling 46 students).

The answers revealed also that the students have difficulties to start writing, to find ideas about some topics especially when they are not interested in these topics, and to organize their ideas and paragraphs. Furthermore, students suffer from the L2 transfer. According to them, they keep translating from their first language in a wrong way. Time management also set another obstacle.

Some students reported that the limited time hinders them to concentrate well when they perform some related tasks to writing. In this respect, it is agreed

among the scholars that having a better command over the writing skill requires better command over the previous aspects.

3. Students' techniques to write words correctly

The third question is multi-responses question where the participants have to choose one of the two options proposed. The purpose of asking this question is to see if the learners are willing to be corrected by their teachers or not, and to know also the extent to which teachers could get into the depth of their students'errors.

Table 2: Techniques to write words

Statement	AF	RF
Write it as you think it is correct	38	42,2%
Avoid using this word in your paragraph	52	57,8%
Total	90	100,%

As it shown in the table 2 (42, 2 %) students have chosen the first option (write it as I think it is correct), and (57, 8%) students have chosen the second option (avoid using this word in my paragraph). On the one hand, this means that another portion of students try to avoid errors in their paragraphs through avoiding to use words they do not know how to spell. On the other hand, we can notice that teachers could not know the weaknesses of their students, which means that they will not be able to treat their errors in writing.

4. Reflection of spelling errors on the writing performance

Table 3: Students spelling errors

Type of Answers	AF	RF
Yes	59	65,6%
No	31	34,4%
Total	90	100%

Question number four is another yes /no question .The purpose behind asking this question is to know the importance of spelling from students' point of view. As we have seen in table 3 (65%) students answered "Yes", and (34, 4%) students answered "No". Thus, a considerable number of students think that spelling represents the level in writing which means that students know well the importance of spelling as a factor that affects their level of writing abilities.

5. Most committed spelling errors in writing

To check if students make spelling errors when writing or not, we have chosen this indirect question rather than asking them directly to avoid having subjective answers, and also to get an idea about the nature of the problems the students are suffering in spelling. The question is a multi-response with seven options, (the types of spelling errors), and the participants were free to choose more than one option.

Table 4: Most frequent Spelling errors

statement	Responses	
	AF	RF
Vowel/Consonant omission	27	16,7%
Vowel/Consonant substitution	20	12,3%
Inaccurate double consonant	16	9,9%
Letters reversals	13	8,0%
Double letters	19	11,7%
Homonyms	36	22,2%
Homographs	31	19,1%
Total	162	100%

We got 162 answers, which means that the majority of students have at least two problems in spelling, as shown in table 4, (22,2%) have a problem with homonyms (words that have the same pronunciation with different spelling) preceded by homographs (words that have the same spelling but different sound) with a percentage of (19,1%). The third type of errors that the students suffer from is the vowel and consonant omission with (16, 7%) of the answers. It is followed by the vowel and consonant substitution with (12, 3%) answers, then comes the fifth option (double letters) with a percentage of (11, 7%), we have (9, 9%) of answers for the third option (inaccurate double consonant), and finally there is only (8%) for letters reversals.

6. Teachers' correction to students' errors

The sixth question is another Yes /No question to check if the students receive any feedback from their teachers on their spelling errors or not. As shown in table 5, (74, 4%) replied "Yes", and (25%) answered "no". This means that the majority of the students have their errors corrected by their teachers. This question demonstrates that EFL teachers are conscious towards the multiple spelling errors that their students may commit. Furthermore, it is clearly shown that the teachers are more conscious about the complexity of the writing tasks since they stand with their students to correct their errors.

Table5: Teachers' correction of errors

Type of Answers	AF	RF
Yes	67	74,4 %
No	23	25,6 %
Total	90	100 %

In the same context, we have added semi-question to know if teachers provide a correction over all the errors that they have made or not. Students who

answered with "yes" in the question (6) were asked again if their teachers correct all the errors they make. Among 67 students who answered yes, 27 (30%) of them said yes, while 40 students (44%) said no, not all of the errors. According to the students 'answers, the majority of teachers do not correct all the spelling errors but they are selective.

7. Cases of teachers' correction to students' errors

This question is a multi-response question, with five options where the participants are able to choose more than one answer. Through this question the researchers aimed to find exactly when teachers usually correct the spelling errors of their students. From table 5, (20. 2%) of the respondents chose option one. For the second option (after each assessment) we have (3, 1%) of the student, (21, 7%) ticked on the third option (homework). A percentage of (31, 8%) chose the fourth option (on exam and quiz), and (23, 3%) have chosen the last option (on projects and research).

Table 6: Teachers' correction to students' errors

statement	Responses	
	AF	RF
Whenever i make an error	26	20,2%
After each assessment	4	3,1%
Homework	28	21,7%
On exams and quizzes	41	31,8%
On projects and research work	30	23,3%
Total	129	100,%

According to the students' answers in this question, we can notice that the majority of the teachers correct spelling errors of their students' exams and

quizzes. This means that the teachers' role is limited to evaluating students' errors more than providing their learners with a feedback whenever it is needed.

8. Teachers' techniques for correcting students' errors

Table 7: Techniques for errors correction

Statement	AF	RF
Provide correct form of the word	7	7,8%
Underline the error	43	47,8%
Circle the error	24	26,7%
Locate the error in the paragraph	9	10%
Comment on the margin that there is an error	7	7,8%
Total	90	100%

This question investigates the strategy that is widely used by the teachers. The result obtained shows that approximately half of students (43) with a percentage of (47, 8%) ticked the second option. The second strategy that is also used by the teachers, is circling the errors where 24 of the students chose it. Other strategies as it appears in the table 7 were not widely used by teachers, 9 students (10%) answered that their teachers provide them a correct form of words, and 7 students for each of the remaining strategies.

We can notice that the majority of the teachers use the indirect strategy when correcting, and they mainly underline the errors, and few of the teachers opt for the direct feedback, giving the student the correct spelling forms.

9. The quality of the teachers' written corrective feedback

Regarding the extent to which the students think that corrective feedback is effective, we have asked this question. This question is a multi-response question with four option (highly effective, effective, no effect, harmful).

Table 8: Students perceptions for the teachers' written feedback

Type of Answers	AF	RF
Highly effective	38	42,2%
Effective	38	42,2%
No effect	13	14,4%
Harmful	1	1,1%
Total	90	100%

Statistics show that 38 students are for both effective and highly effective), whereas 13 students think that corrective feedback has no effect, and only one student who answered that corrective feedback is harmful. This means that the majority of students believe that the corrective feedback is effective, and more than that is highly effective.

10. The role of written feedback on the writing performance

Table 9: The role of written feedback on writing performance

Type of Answers	AF	RF
Yes	81	90%
No	9	10%
Total	90	100%

Question ten is a yes/no question. It was asked in order to investigate the students' perspectives regarding the correction of their spelling errors and whether this correction helps them to improve their writing performance. Statistics displayed in table 9 shows that 81 students answered yes, whereas 9 students answered "no". This means that the majority of the students believe that the corrective feedback helps them to improve their writing performance**.**

5. Discussion

According to the results, students have different problems in writing tasks. The majority suffer from homonyms and homographs spelling errors, which means that the students should get a help from their teachers to get rid of these problems

These results were confirmed through the students' answers about the teachers' correction of errors through the indirect strategy. However, the result of the students' questionnaire indicates that the students prefer to be corrected through the direct strategy. This contradiction between the teachers' preferences and the students' one may affect the outcome of the written feedback on the writing performance, but teachers think that the indirect feedback is more helpful than the indirect one for students. They justify that the indirect feedback pushes the students to make efforts to get rid of their spelling errors. This is confirmed through the students' answers through the idea that the teachers should use different strategies while correcting to fit the needs of the students.

In this study, the researchers asked two questions. The first question was about the third year English students attitudes toward written corrective strategy to improve their writing performance. The majority of the students claimed that they have positive attitude toward written corrective feedback. Moreover, third year English students stated that they appreciate to be corrected on their writing errors. They believe that the written corrective feedback can improve their writing performances.

The second question denoted teachers' attitudes toward the use of the written corrective feedback. English Foreign language teachers had a positive attitude toward the written corrective feedback. They claimed that it is an effective strategy, but they motioned that students should take into consideration the

feedback provided to them to really get its effectiveness.

6. CONCLUSION

Writing is considered as one of the most difficult language skills, especially for non-native students. Students in this case are more likely to make different errors including writing errors, which are serious and need to be corrected frequently for improving writing accuracy. The existed literature review proved that the students face spelling problems when they write compositions in English language. It also confirmed that using written corrective feedback proved to be valuable in improving EFL students' writing. Through this research, we intended to introduce the role of the written corrective feedback in improving the students writing performance. Furthermore, it explores students' attitudes toward the written corrective feedback in facilitating the spelling difficulties.

A questionnaire was submitted to one fifth of the population of the third year students at Setif2 University. Data were analyzed using the SPSS for quantitative data. Findings showed that the students' point of view regarding the usefulness of the teachers' written corrective feedback is helpful to improve students' writing performance. They further welcomed the idea of using this technique to improve their spelling performance.

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