

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LANGUAGE FEEDBACK IN TEACHING WRITING

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Summary. The article deals with the problem of providing language feedback more efficiently and the effectiveness of language feedback in writing activities.

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The most common questions among language teachers are related to providing language feedback more efficiently and the effectiveness of language feedback in writing activities. Speaking to the second issue, we cannot say unequivocally that written corrective feedback does or does not work. In fact, this has been the most widely debated issue in second language writing for the last 20 years. There are, however, certain things that we know and don't know as well as ways to save time in the feedback process. First, most students want language feedback. Second, students should be encouraged to revise for content and organization before revising for language. This is because if teachers provide language feedback, students will likely not revise for content and organization because the feedback may not pertain to the new content. Furthermore, students may notice and be able to correct some of their own language errors when making global revisions. Finally, everyone agrees that students need to do something with the feedback for it to be effective. Without a

final step, some students may not look at the feedback, and even those who do may not process it effectively.

Answering the question “does written corrective feedback work?” is difficult because the question is too vague. Defining *written corrective feedback* is possible, but explaining what is meant by *work* is not straightforward, so let us begin with a discussion of the variety of ways to give language feedback on students’ papers. The most common options include correcting errors, underlining them, or assigning them some type of code (such as *s-v* for *subject-verb agreement*). Coding is likely the most common way to give feedback because simply correcting an error does not encourage students to think about the problem, while underlining an error does not provide any metalinguistic information to help students determine the problem. Other less common methods include putting a check in the margin on any lines with errors, highlighting general error types in different colors (e.g., syntactic, morphological, and lexical), and rewriting ungrammatical sentences.

The second point is whether or not written corrective feedback of any type is effective, and there are a few ways to approach this issue. Certainly, corrective feedback of any kind will result in a better revision, but given the time-consuming nature of giving feedback, most teachers want some reassurance that the feedback will help students in their subsequent writing and not on only one draft. The other issue to consider is that the feedback may result in fewer errors but simpler, less sophisticated writing because students are too focused on avoiding errors.

Some studies that have shown improvement on new pieces of writing have targeted only a few errors, often called *focused correction*. Although these studies are interesting, they likely do not reflect how most teachers correct errors, and they ignore the impact on other aspects of the students’ language. Of the studies that examined more *unfocused feedback*, two have demonstrated the

effectiveness of feedback in error reduction without harmful effects to other aspects of writing. One of these two studies is unique because students wrote every day and had to rewrite until there were no errors. It raises the important question of how intensive feedback has to be for it to work.

The likely reason that so many teachers and researchers are concerned about the effectiveness of corrective feedback is because it is extremely time consuming. There are several reasons for this. First, it is difficult for a teacher to focus on meaning (i.e., the content of the writing) and grammar at the same time. This is another reason to give students feedback on context and organization first; teachers can focus on language problems only on revised versions. In addition, although certain problems such as subject-verb agreement errors are straightforward and easy to correct or code, giving feedback becomes time-consuming when students' meaning is not clear or when there are multiple ways to fix a problem. Many teachers also struggle with correcting something that is not necessarily wrong but simply awkward.

One point made throughout this article is that because writing is helpful for a variety of reasons, it is good to have students write more often. Sometimes teachers don't have students write because they do not have time to give feedback on every draft or on every piece of writing. Nevertheless, there are alternatives to giving feedback that are likely helpful. First, teachers can encourage self-correction. Have students bring their papers to class and give them some type of check list that includes points such as *Check the subject-verb agreement in each sentence*. The benefit of doing this activity in class is that teachers can also include instructions such as *Circle any words that you are not sure are used correctly* and then walk around and help students once they have circled the words. Second, teachers can provide feedback to the entire class. One way to do this is to collect students' writing and then choose sentences that include the most common errors. These can be corrected in class, and then the

students can rewrite their own essays. This approach works particularly well in homogeneous classes where the students are writing on similar topics. The hope is that students can apply the corrections to their own writing. Group correction may be effective for sentences that include awkward language. Because such errors are not easy to correct, they can be discussed as a class and more time can be devoted to them.

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