

Beyond Error Analysis: Solving EFL Student' Writing Problems in Accuracy

Lestari Setyowati
STKIP PGRI Pasuruan

Email : lestarisetyowati@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

There is a common assumption that a good piece of writing is often seen from its flawless grammar. Thus, in the world of academic writing, accuracy always becomes the main concern of any writing teachers. Giving feedback, therefore, becomes necessary since teachers could not put aside and disregard grammar. This article is intended to describe different types of Corrective Feedbacks, and type of Corrective Feedbacks which are effective to reduce learners' error in L2 writing based on some research findings, and how to use it to promote its effectiveness. In the end of the article, some suggestions are also addressed to the English teacher based on the research results in CF.

Keywords: *writing problems, feedback, Accuracy*

During our teaching of Academic writing, accuracy has become the main concern. As teachers, we mostly judge the quality of the students' writing often from its accuracy. When a student makes a lot of grammatical errors in his writing, we directly jump to a conclusion that his writing is 'bad' or 'terrible'. We often thought that error corrections should be done to improve the quality of the students' writing. Because of this, we are often trapped in the torturing assessment activity in which we have to read piles of students' compositions and do, what it seems to be, endless checking of students' errors which are mostly in grammar. And we, too, often feel depressed that however hard we have tried to fix the students' grammar, the correction mostly harvest on nothing. Then, we are asking our self, why does that happen? Reading Truscott's review articles (1996) in *Language Learning* saying that all forms of error correction in L2 students writing are not only ineffective but potentially harmful and should be abandoned makes me curious to go further beyond error analysis and error correction. Is it true that error correction is ineffective and useless? What does the current research on corrective feedback tell us? What should be corrected then in a student' piece of writing? How and when should we respond to students' grammatical errors? What kinds of

response that students mostly pay attention to? This paper is intended to answer these questions by reviewing research based articles on corrective feedback to improve the quality of our teaching.

Accuracy

Before we talk further about accuracy, it is better to define the word 'accuracy'. According to Housen *et al* (2012, p.2), accuracy refers to learners' ability to produce target-like and error-free language. Accuracy always becomes the main concern of any writing teachers. Since language used is one of the requirements of a good piece of composition, these teachers could not put aside and disregard grammar. Thus, they are looking for ways to help students write a composition accurately. Unfortunately, most efforts end in failures since teachers are not backed up with adequate knowledge on how to improve accuracy in writing.

Before we discuss further, the following text is given as an example of a student's composition. The text was written by one of the students taking Writing III class in STKIP PGRI Pasuruan. The class was assigned to make a movie critics from one of the films released in Indonesian cinema. The type of writing is expository writing developed by example and details paragraph organization. As we

read the text, will we let go the grammatical errors occurred in the composition?

Here's the thing about "Habibie & Ainun (2012)": you either love it or hate it. I am curious when my sister kept talking about this movie. She say if this movie is so so sweet and make me cry at the end of the movie. So my friend and I went to NSC Pasuruan to watch the movie. It is the story of the third President of Indonesia and the mother country. The story of Ainun and Habibie. Habibie and Ainun is about love story from they were young until Ainun passed away.

Habibie & Ainun Indonesia is a drama movie which was released on December 20, 2012. The film stars Reza Rahardian, Citra Lestari Bunga and Tio Pakusadewo. At launch, the film is witnessed by the President of the Republic of Indonesia-6, Dr. H. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, accompanied by the Governor of Andhra Pradesh to-16, Ir. H. Joko Widodo, and by the film's main character himself, the President of the Republic of Indonesia-3, Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie. The film is taken from a memory written about his late wife Habibie, Hasri Ainun Habibie, in books Ainun and Habibie. Habibie, as we know as the former president of Indonesia, is described as genius, rather stiff and has funny accent. Meanwhile, Ainun is gentle. Both are smart. They can complete each other. In addition to the beautiful and inspiring story, the players are really total. I really fell in love with acting Reza. I think that the totality conducted Reza Rahardian in playing the movie, it would cast as the main character or the maid, her acting is really great. Overall, Habibie and Ainun is not be missed and many hurried and curious about this movie story. But nothing that makes this movie romantic originally changed become laughter. Because of, the prominence of the advertising and film editing look less natural. So far the movie is taken from a memory written about his late

wife Habibie, Hasri Ainun Habibie, in books Ainun and Habibie very interesting, there is a message of moral and romantic story.

(Nur Fatiah Laila Sari, 2011 A)

I believe that it is hard to neglect the grammatical errors found in the composition because they are too obvious. Any writing teachers will take out a pen and start doing some corrections on the grammar. The question is which type of error correction is effective to improve the students' accuracy in writing? Will they remember the feedback later if they are asked to write a new piece of writing? How should we do the correction? Perhaps the answer to those questions lie in the theory of error correction or Corrective Feedback (CF).

Corrective Feedback

Since most writing teachers believe that proper use of language cannot be put aside from a good composition, it is always interesting to talk about how to correct EFL students' error in writing. This section will address different types of Corrective Feedbacks, and type of Corrective Feedbacks which are effective to reduce learners' error in L2 writing based on some research findings, and how to use it to promote its effectiveness.

There are some strategies in the provision of feedback to correct the learners' errors in writing. According to Ellis (2008), six different strategies in error correction can be applied in ELT classroom, namely Direct CF, Indirect CF, Metalinguistics CF, Focus of the feedback, Electronic feedback, and Reformulation. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) define Direct CF the provision of some form of explicit correction of linguistic form or structure above or near the linguistic error. It may consist of the crossing out of an unnecessary word/phrase/ morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme, and the provision of the correct form or structure. They further define indirect CF as the indication that an error has been made but correction is not provided. The feedback is typically

provided in one of two ways: (1) underlining or circling an error and (2) recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line. Rather than the teacher providing an explicit correction, writers are left to resolve and correct the problem that has been drawn to their attention. More recently, direct CF has included written meta-linguistic explanation (the provision of grammar rules and examples of correct usage), sometimes oral form-focused instruction to clarify the written meta-linguistic explanation is provided (Bitchener and Knoch, 2010), and sometimes error codes are written in the margin, or brief grammatical descriptions are provided at the bottom of the text (Ellis, 2008).

Focus of the feedback is another type of CF. Ellis (2008) divides this into two types; unfocused feedback (when the attempt is to correct most or all of the students' errors), and focused feedback (select one or two types of errors). The fourth kind of CF is Electronic feedback. In this type of feedback, an indication of an error is given by teacher, then a hyperlink is provided to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage. The last type of CF within Ellis' typology is Reformulation. This type of CF requires a native speaker to reformulate the students' entire text to make the language seem 'native-like' while keeping the original content intact.

Recent Research Findings in Corrective Feedback

Trascotts' publication of his controversial articles in 1996 entitled "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes" published by *Language Learning* (46:2, 327–369) has caused debates about the value of Corrective Feedback (CF) in ESL/EFL writing. His strong position saying that "grammar correction" has no place in writing courses" has triggered research on CF to flourish. Though the research results in terms of the effectiveness of CF in L2 writing remains inconclusive, teachers and practitioners still can learn something from research in this field. Research findings which result in the

effectiveness of CF can equip language teachers with different kinds of strategies and help them to decide which type of CF is suitable for their learners. The followings are some research findings which confirm that error corrections are still fruitful to reduce the learners' error in writing.

First, to promote better accuracy in writing, teachers can use combination of different types of feedback. Bitchener et al (2005) investigates the effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing. They claim that the provision of full, explicit written feedback, together with individual conference feedback resulted in significantly greater accuracy when different linguistic forms (past tense and the definite article) were used in new pieces of writing.

These researchers come to a conclusion that the combination of direct oral feedback with direct written feedback had a greater effect than direct written feedback alone on improved accuracy. They also found out that combined feedback option facilitated improvement in the more "treatable", rule-governed features such as in the past simple tense and the definite article, than in the less "treatable" feature as in prepositions. The result of the research, thus, suggest classroom L2 writing teachers provide learners with both oral feedback as well as written feedback on the more "treatable" types of linguistic error.

Second, to treat errors which are mostly occurred in students' writing, written direct corrective feedback and meta-linguistic explanation can be very helpful. Bitchener's (2008) research on the effectiveness of direct corrective feedback on the targeted features, definite ('the') and indefinite articles ('a/an'), found out that this type of feedback is proved to be helpful in improving learners' accuracy in a new piece of writing. Based on this research, to reach its outmost effectiveness, the teacher can provide mini-lessons to all students on a small range of recurrent error categories, and follow these up with small group meta-linguistic sessions on particular error categories with those students who have the most difficulty with a particular form or

structure. One-on-one conferences could then be offered to those students who require more attention. Additionally, the teacher can also negotiate with their students about the features that will be focused on so that they will internalize them.

And *third*, teachers can use focused approach in correcting the students' error in writing Bitchener and Knoch (2008). Focused approach is a type of Corrective Feedback in which teachers focus on the targeted structure to be corrected. For example, past tense Verbs only, or article only. In their research, the targeted structure was the English article. After a ten-month period treatment, the focused approach was found to be effective in improving the students' accuracy. They come to a conclusion that focused written corrective feedback has the potential to help learners acquire features of a second language.

In sum, among the many types of CF, recent research shows some feedbacks (explicit written feedback together with individual conference feedback, written direct corrective feedback and meta-linguistic explanation, and focused CF) are proved to be very effective in correcting the students' errors.

Recommendations for EFL Teachers

There are some recommendations to teaching that can be drawn from the results of these research. *First*, error correction still can be done in the EFL classroom. Teachers need to combine different types of CF to get the maximum results of error correction in the learners long term effect of learning. Most teachers use direct CF in correcting the students' error. Research has shown, however, that direct CF needs to be combined with other types of CF. Direct CF alone may not result in the long term learning because it is so easy to be forgotten. When direct CF is combined with individual conference or metalinguistic explanation, better learning can be achieved so that the long term effect in error reduction can be expected.

Second, research in CF also has shown that not all errors should be corrected. Teachers need to focus what

targeted features learners need to give more attention to. Teachers can focus only in the Verbs, or the Nouns, or particular structure. When error correction is given in an unfocused way, there is a great possibility that learners will soon forget about those feedback. Since no learning effect occurred, such kind of practice is not worth continuing. So in my personal opinion, a teacher need to decide which type of grammatical feature in the students' writing that he wants the students to focused on. This can be done in two ways; inductively or deductively. Inductively means the focused CF comes from the data by collecting students' errors through an error analysis first, then finding out which type of errors which is the most frequent to occur. The information about this most frequent error become the basis of mini lesson in the explicit CF. On the other hand, deductive decision in CF means that the teacher has already a plan before hand that he wishes to focus on certain type of grammatical feature on the students' composition. He might know which type of grammatical feature he wants to focus on based on his teaching experience and his students' learning differences.

And *third*, though no research confirms this yet, I am in the opinion that the examples of wrong grammatical sentences used in the explicit feedback should come from the students' writing, not from other sources. Novel sentences made by the teacher might not have the 'personal feel' for the students. Making them emotionally involved in the CF perhaps can trigger their long term memory that hopefully can affect their long term learning. To tell the truth, this happened to me once when I joined Writing III class in my S1. The writing teacher gave the example of wrong uses of 'a' and 'the' in the class discussion by citing ungrammatical sentences from my composition. I know the different usage of 'a' and 'the' better until today partly because of that experience. What is interesting is that I still keep the composition with all its feedbacks from the teacher because I valued the experience.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the students' error in writing is just the first step of helping the students to learn better. For students to improve their writing, among other things, they have to be provided with appropriate feedback. Despite of the controversial issue in whether or not giving error corrections, some teachers still find it useful to enhance the students' writing performance. Thus, knowing the recent research in CF will enable teachers to be effective in giving the feedback. However, if everything has been said and done, and they are not improved in their writing, perhaps the problem lies in the motives. As stated by Gue'nette (2007) only students who are committed to improving their writing will be able to better their writing quality. For those who do not, they will not be able to improve anything no matter what type of corrective feedback is provided.

References:

- Bichener, J., young, Y., and Cameron, D. 2005. The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14. 191-205
- Bichener, J. 2008. Evidence in support of written corrective. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17. 102-118
- Bichener, J., and Ute Knoch . 2010. Raising the linguistic accuracy level of advanced L2 writers with written corrective feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 19.2071-217
- Ellis, Rod. 2008. A Typology Of Written Corrective Feedback Types. *ELT Journal* , Volume 63/2
- Gue'nette, Danielle . 2007. Is feedback pedagogically correct? Research design issues in studies of feedback on writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 16 (2007) 40–53
- Haghverdi, Hamid Reza, Reza Birian and Hamid Reza Khalaji. 2013. *The Impact of Task-planning and Gender on the Accuracy of Narrations Composed by Iranian EFL Learners*. *Journal of*

Language Teaching and Research, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 74-83.

- Housen, Alex, Folkert KUIken & Ineke Vedder (Eds). 2012. *Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency: Definitions, Measurement, and Research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company. (Online) (<http://books.google.co.id/>) accessed on 26 April 2013.
- Rahimpour, Massoud and Pakhshan Hosseini. 2010. The Impact of Task Complexity on L2 Learners' Written Narratives. *English Language Teaching* Vol. 3, No. 3; September 2010
- Truscott, J. 1996. The Case Against Grammar Correction In L2 Writing Classes. *Language Learning*, 46, 327–36