

A preliminary investigation into student writers' perception of corrective feedback focus

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether second language student writers' perception or lack of perception of targeted error type influences corrective feedback effectiveness. The targeted linguistic error type in this study involved subject-verb agreement errors. Thirty-six college students from northern Taiwan were assigned into one control group without receiving error correction, one experimental group receiving error correction without perceiving the targeted error type, and another experimental group receiving error correction and perceiving the targeted error type. The results showed that when student writers received corrections and perceived the subject-verb agreement errors as the targeted error type, they made more improvements than those who received corrections but did not perceive the targeted error type in immediate posttests. Furthermore, the learning benefit of student writers' perception of corrective feedback focus was retained in delayed posttests. Student writers who received the corrections and perceived the targeted error type of subject-verb agreement errors significantly outperformed not only those who received corrections but did not perceive the targeted error type but also those who did not receive corrections in terms of learning gains in delayed posttests. Implications for the present study for the written corrective feedback research community were discussed.

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Introduction

Corrective feedback, within the framework of second language acquisition research, can be considered a type of second language input for the learner. Second language input has been seen as essential to the learner's acquisition of a second language. The input can take one of two forms: positive evidence or negative evidence (Gass, 1997). Most input studies have examined the effect of positive evidence (e.g., native speakers' input or their modified input) on the learner's second language acquisition (Ellis, 2003). Corrective feedback in response to the learner's non-target-like language performance is a type of negative evidence, that is, indications concerning forms that are poorly composed in the target language (Li, 2010). Researchers have investigated

whether the learner's spoken language development can be facilitated by corrective feedback (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Ellis et al., 2006; Loewen & Nabei, 2007). Nevertheless, writing differs from speaking in several aspects. The issue of how corrective feedback influences the learner's writing development thus needs further exploration.

In the mid-1990s, a series of widely cited and influential papers by Truscott (1996) *inter alia* began claiming that there is no empirical evidence that teachers' corrections of second language students' grammar errors have any positive effects on their writing. This vein of publications recently found new force with the publication of meta-analyses of published studies on the effectiveness of grammar feedback that indicated the effect size for grammar feedback to be either negligible or slightly negative (Truscott, 2007). Truscott's (1996, 2007) conclusion is that teachers should stop correcting grammatical errors in second language students' writing. In contrast, researchers who contend against this and in favor of correction had little evidence to support their position (e.g. Bruton, 2010; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Wible, 2001).

Meta-analyses of corrective feedback studies have shown that focused feedback that targeted one or two specific error types for corrections is more effective than unfocused feedback that corrects errors of all sorts (Brown et al., 2023; Kao & Wible, 2014; Lim & Renandya, 2020). However, a critical research issue has been disregarded in the vast majority of this research. The research on focused feedback has tacitly characterized focus as being determined by the researcher or teacher, who selects the specific errors to be addressed for correction (e.g. Bitchener 2008; Deng et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021). When the researcher targets a specific linguistic feature for correction, the feedback provided is seen as being focused specifically on errors related to the linguistic feature. This raises the inquiry regarding whether feedback is oriented towards the perspective of the recipient learner, as well as whether the usefulness of feedback varies between students who perceive a certain focus in the feedback they receive and those who do not. The significance of learner awareness in relation to feedback reception might provide clear implications for classroom instructional strategies. Motivated by the inquiry raised above, this study intends to focus on the issue of learners' perceptions of focus which has not been fully addressed in corrective feedback studies.

A match between what is made salient by teachers and what learners perceive has been claimed to be significant in learners' second language acquisition processes (Kim, 2005; Sharwood Smith, 1991). In terms of corrective feedback, Ferris (2010) has claimed that focused feedback that mainly targets one error type for correction is effective because it reduces the number of error types and helps students clearly focus their attention on the error type that instructors seek to correct. This leads to a question of whether the learners' perception of teachers' feedback strategy to focus on limited error types is influential in focused feedback effectiveness.

The objective of this research is to examine the extent to which learners possess awareness regarding the specific sort of error being addressed for correction, and to determine whether this awareness is associated with the efficacy of feedback in improving subsequent writing. This study therefore is designed to address the issue of whether focused feedback is effective for subject-verb agreement errors when learners perceive the targeted error type. This study investigates whether there is a difference between students who perceive the targeted subject-verb agreement error type and those who do not perceive the targeted subject-verb agreement error type in terms of feedback effectiveness. In other words, when a teacher corrects subject-verb agreement errors in students' writing, does the students' perceiving these targeted subject-verb agreement error type influence feedback effectiveness? The issue of this study is therefore to investigate whether students' perception or lack of perception of targeted error type influenced feedback effectiveness in terms of subject-verb agreement errors treated.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to address the research issue raised above. How the issue was addressed was elaborated in the following sections, including descriptions of participants, targeted linguistics errors, corrective feedback, writing tasks, open exit questions, procedures, and data analysis.

Participants

Thirty six college students participated in the study. They came from a basic level classes and the participants' TOEIC scores exhibited a range between 412 and 486 points. Research participants in the study were divided into three groups: one control group that did not receive error correction, one experimental group that received error correction without perceiving what error type was targeted for correction, and another experimental group that received error correction and perceived what error type was specified. A detailed description of the error type treated and defined was given as follows.

Targeted Linguistics Errors

One rule-based linguistics error type, the subject-verb agreement error type, was targeted in this study. In addition to the lexical verb for the subject-verb agreement which was selected for corrections in previous studies, another subject-verb agreement structure, the copula *be*, which has more distinct forms with respect to person, number, and tense than lexical verbs for subject-verb agreement was targeted for correction. There were potential subject-verb agreement issues identified, including: 1) the omission of the third person singular inflection of the lexical verb, 2) excessive use of the third person singular inflection of the lexical verb, 3) the omission of the copula *be*, and 4) the use of an incorrect form of *be*.

Corrective Feedback

Given that the bulk of previous studies on focused feedback have mostly examined direct feedback, the experimental group in this study was exclusively provided with direct corrective feedback. The way of directly correcting subject-verb agreement errors not only provided accurate linguistic forms, but also utilized an arrow to highlight the agreement between the subject and the verb.

Writing Tasks

Writing tasks were designed to elicit subject-verb agreement uses, the targeted linguistic feature. In the task, language features are necessary, natural, and beneficial to learning tasks, so students use these linguistic features incidentally rather than intentionally in a communicative context (Ellis, 2003). In the pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test stages, students acted as job applicants and drafted three distinct application letters. The job advertisements changed at various testing phases, so students wrote letters in response to the advertisements they read. The writing challenges were modified at different testing stages in order to ensure that students generated a variety of lexical verbs that aligned with subject-verb agreement.

Open Exit Questions

To understand whether research participants receiving focused correction perceive tokens corrected as tokens of one error type, the corrected essays in the pretests were returned to participants and the following three open exit questions were asked:

(1). Please have a look at the teacher's comments on the writing structures and organizations in the corrected writing, and then respond whether you agree with the teacher's comments. Why?

(2). Please have a look at the teacher's corrections on linguistic errors and observe how the teacher corrected the errors, and then describe what the teacher's purpose is.

(3). Is there anything in common in terms of the errors the teacher corrected?

Students were requested to answer the questions above and explain what they have found no matter whether they perceive the teacher's principle to correct errors. To avoid any misunderstandings caused by language barriers, the questions were presented in Chinese and the students were allowed to answer in either Chinese or English.

Procedure

The students enrolled in English writing and reading lessons were divided into three distinct groups: one control group and two experimental groups. All participants were included in three writing tasks that focused on the subject-verb agreement structures. Employing a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest design, the initial writing task was

administered as the pretest, followed by the immediate posttest as the second task, and finally the delayed posttest as the third task. The accuracy rates of subject-verb agreement structures for all participants were calculated based on their performance on the first task. After a period of one week, the two experimental groups were provided with corrections specifically targeting subject-verb agreement errors, whereas the control group did not receive any corrections pertaining to language errors. The control and experimental groups were provided with content feedback aimed at enhancing their communicative writing skills. Following the receipt of the revised essays, each group was instructed to allocate ten minutes for the purpose of reviewing the provided feedback before returning the corrected essays. Following the completion of the treatment, all groups were instructed to engage in the second writing activity as a posttest. After a period of one month, a delayed posttest was conducted, which was designed to resemble the initial and subsequent writing tasks. The purpose of this delayed posttest was to assess whether the advantages gained from receiving corrections could be maintained over time. Following the administration of delayed posttests, students were provided with corrected writing assignments. Subsequently, an open-ended exit questionnaire was administered to gauge the perception of students in the two experimental groups on the specific error categories that were addressed in the corrected tokens.

Data Analysis

Bitchener (2008) conducted a calculation to determine the percentage of accurate utilization. The linguistic features that were specifically targeted were initially assessed based on their correct usage in each obligatory context. The aforementioned scores were subsequently utilized as numerators in ratios, with the denominators being the sums of the obligatory contexts for the specific linguistic elements under consideration. The subsequent equation demonstrates the method by which the percentage of accuracy was computed.

$$\frac{n \text{ correct suppliance in contexts}}{n \text{ obligatory contexts} + n \text{ suppliance in nonobligatory contexts}} \times 100 = \text{percent accuracy}$$

Calculations of inter-rater reliability between two raters showed 97% agreement on the subject-verb agreement accuracy rate in the initial analyses. After collaborative analyses of the cases where two raters initially disagreed with each other, a subject-verb agreement accuracy rate of 100% was finally attained. Gain scores were determined by deducting the pretest scores from the posttest scores as well as the delayed posttest scores. To examine the treatment effects in both the immediate posttest and the delayed posttest, data on student gain scores were submitted to the Kruskal-Wallis test.

To investigate the effects of students' perception of error types targeted for corrections on gains in immediate posttests and gains in delayed posttests of targeted language features, the gains in immediate posttests and gains in delayed posttests of students

who separately perceive and do not perceive tokens corrected as certain specified error type targeted for correction were investigated. The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to examine whether there is a difference within students receiving corrective feedback between those who perceive the targeted linguistic error types and those who do not perceive the targeted linguistic error types.

Results

In this section, statistical analyses were performed and results were reported to address the issues of learners' perception of targeted error types raised in this study. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the gains in immediate posttests (calculated by subtracting pretest scores from posttest scores) and gains in delayed posttests (calculated by subtracting pretest scores from delayed posttest scores) for the accuracy of the targeted language usages in each group.

Table 1

Gain Scores in Immediate and Delayed Posttests

Gains	Groups	N	Mean	SD
Gains Immediate Posttests	in Non-correction group	12	8.808	18.074
	Correction group without perception	14	-1.635	11.993
	Correction group with perception	10	21.880	5.577
Gains Delayed Posttests	in Non-correction group	12	4.875	8.077
	Correction group without perception	14	-6.107	12.283
	Correction group with perception	10	14.600	1.290

To investigate whether learners' perception of error types targeted for corrections influences the written corrective feedback effectiveness, the three open exit questions shown in the section of methodology were asked and the correction group was divided into two groups: one group who perceived the targeted error types and the other group who did not perceive the targeted error type. Among the three open exit questions, the second and the third questions regarding corrections on linguistic errors were asked to determine whether the learners perceived the targeted error types after they received corrections. If the learners specify what error types are targeted for corrections like subject-verb agreement errors, or describe the rules of the targeted language usages, they are grouped as the group who perceived the targeted error types. On the other hand, if the learners simply indicate error types targeted for corrections as grammatical or language errors in general, they are grouped as the group who did not perceive the targeted error types. If the learners do not respond to the questions or their responses are irrelevant to the questions, they are further interviewed to confirm whether they perceived the targeted error types.

To determine whether there is a difference within students receiving non-correction, students receiving correction and perceiving the subject-verb agreement error type, and students receiving correction without perceiving the subject-verb agreement error

type, two pairs of Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed in the following Table 2. One pair of Kruskal-Wallis tests was to analyze the effects of the corrective feedback on immediate posttests of the subject-verb agreement structure and the other pair was to analyze the effects of the corrective feedback on delayed posttests of the subject-verb agreement structure. Results for the learning gains on subject-verb agreement accuracy yielded statistically significant differences among the three groups in immediate posttests (Chi-square = 10.543, $p < .05$) and delayed posttests (Chi-square = 18.993, $p < .05$).

Analyses of post-hoc comparisons were performed to investigate whether any significant difference existed among the three groups. Results for the gains in immediate posttests on subject-verb agreement accuracy showed that there was a difference between learners who perceived the subject-verb agreement errors and those who did not perceive the subject-verb agreement errors (Test Statistic = -13.886; $p < .05$). Specifically, learners who perceived the targeted error type of correction on the subject-verb agreement error type improved more than those who did not perceive the targeted error type. In addition, results for the gains in delayed posttests on subject-verb agreement accuracy revealed a significant difference between learners who perceived the subject-verb agreement errors and those who did not perceive the subject-verb agreement errors (Test Statistic = -18.600; $p < .05$) as well as a significant difference between learners who perceived the subject-verb agreement errors and those who did not receive any correction on language errors (Test Statistic = 13.100, $p < .05$). To be specific, learners who perceived the subject-verb agreement error type targeted for correction made more significant improvements than those who did not perceive the targeted error type and those who did not receive correction.

Table 2
Kruskal-Wallis Test on Gain Scores

Group	n	Mean rank	Chi-square	p	Post-hoc Comparison
Gains in immediate posttests					
Non-correction group	12	19.500	10.543	0.005	c > b
Correction group without perception	14	12.210			
Correction group with perception	10	26.100			
Gains in delayed posttests					
Non-correction group	12	17.000	18.993	0.000	c > a, b
Correction group without perception	14	11.500			
Correction group with perception	10	30.100			

Note. a = non-correction group

b = correction group without perception

c = correction group with perception

Discussion

Focused feedback studies have primarily focused on examining whether providing corrective feedback that specifically targets certain types of errors leads to improved accuracy in learners' subsequent writing in relation to the corrected error type (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Sheen, 2007; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). The current approach in the scholarly literature regarding corrective feedback entails determining the focus solely based on the elements that are indicated in the revised text. What are the perspectives of the learner in relation to receiving the correction? Researchers can justify the prevailing and predominantly implicit approach of defining focus exclusively based on teachers' intentions to restrict the range of faults they evaluate. Should feedback be deemed targeted if the learner, upon observing the corrected tokens, is unable to discern that the teacher has restricted those corrections to a specific sort of error? The inquiry at hand may be referred to as the matter of "Whose focus?" Although no previous research has addressed this particular inquiry, the present study aims to examine potential variations in the efficacy of focused correction based on the learner's awareness of the correction emphasis. Remarkably, it has been discovered that the level of awareness exhibited by learners regarding the corrections being made has a statistically significant impact. The findings of this study indicate that learners who were able to identify subject-verb agreement errors demonstrated considerably greater improvement in both short-term and long-term learning outcomes compared to those who were unable to identify such errors and those who did not get any corrections.

The finding above provides empirical evidence for Truscott's (1996; 2007) assertion that corrective feedback lacks efficacy in addressing linguistic problems unless learners are able to perceive the specific linguistic errors being targeted through the provided corrections. The provision of corrective feedback may display inconsistency and impose cognitive demands on learners when addressing subject-verb agreement errors encompassing copula *be* and lexical verbs. Nevertheless, students who accurately identified all of the corrected tokens as instances of a certain subject-verb agreement error type may recognize the targeted nature of the feedback, perceive it as trustworthy, and naturally understand the correction, so enhancing their language skills. The study conducted by Shao and Liu (2022) provides empirical evidence that supports the notion that engaging in deeper cognitive processes has a positive impact on second language learning among student writers, particularly in relation to the utilization of corrective feedback. Hence, the findings of this study suggest that in cases when the error types requiring correction are intricate, it is crucial to establish alignment between teachers' deliberate focus on specific error types and learners' understanding and identification of those error types. This alignment is seen beneficial for the advancement of learners' interlanguage development.

The preceding discussion regarding the perceived focus of corrective feedback among student writers has resulted in a noteworthy pedagogical implication. The ineffectiveness of correcting subject-verb agreement errors, encompassing both


lexical verbs and the copula *be*, has been shown in previous studies (Kao, 2022; Parreno, 2015). The potential consequence of attempting to address a broad spectrum of subject-verb agreement errors for the purpose of correction is the potential for overwhelming learners with an excessive amount of linguistic information, so overloading their cognitive capacities. This, in turn, can lead to confusion and doubt regarding the specific focus of the feedback provided. When teachers' feedback on a certain type of error lacks consistency, it is recommended that writing instructors initiate dialogues with students to resolve the identified error type. The implementation of this strategy has the potential to improve students' understanding and awareness of the specific error type by means of providing corrective feedback.

Conclusion

Despite the potential contribution of the finding in this study, there are some limitations which should be considered. First of all, the sample size is rather small in all groups where learners were divided into different groups. Especially, it is impossible to estimate how many students would perceive the targeted error type and how many students would not perceive the targeted error type. More students should be recruited to examine the effects of learners' perception of targeted error type on corrective feedback practice in future studies. In addition, because of the limitation of the use of open-ended questions, it would be worthwhile for future research to investigate learners' perception of targeted error type in terms of corrective feedback effects by using more than one qualitative research instruments such as think-aloud protocols or diary studies, to reconfirm whether or not learners really perceive the targeted error type.

The question of whether CF is effective is complicated, and the answer is context dependent. For example, researchers must consider error types and the form and content of corrections, among many other factors. Much of the empirical research on error correction effectiveness has conflated different error types. Such errors have been categorized too broadly, and the content of feedback has been loosely defined. Future research should explore distinctions in other moderator variables (i.e. learners' perception of focus in this study) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the roles of these variables in CF effectiveness.

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Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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