



CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

For several decades, error correction has drawn much attention of both ESL and EFL writing researchers. There has been constant heated debate and to date the research findings remain inconclusive in ascertaining its effectiveness in facilitating improvement in student writing. Researchers' attitudes toward error correction, as pointed out by Lee (1997) in her study, have evolved from the strict avoidance of errors and hence quick and direct error correction before the 1960s, to the condemnation of error correction as harmful and unnecessary in the late 1960s, and later to a more critical view of the need and value of error correction in the 1970s and 1980s. The controversy over the topic of error correction, however, was unresolved in the 1990s. Even now in the 2000s, there is still a lack of consensus concerning this issue. In this chapter, this issue is addressed from different perspectives through examining important studies in this research tradition.

Teacher Feedback

The approaches to writing instruction have undergone dramatic changes over the past decades. From the early 20th century into the 1960s, product approach was commonly accepted by composition teachers. However, this traditional paradigm gradually shifted when a strongly influential trend broadly known as process approach emerged in the 1960s and became popular and widely accepted in the 1980s. The shift of paradigm directed teachers' attention from the form to the content of writing, but it did not change the belief of both teachers and students that teachers' feedback on student writing is essential for students to improve their writing (Ferris, 1997; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Lee, 2003).

Despite the belief of its importance, teacher feedback was considered by some researchers to be inefficacious (Fitzgerald, 1987; Hillocks, 1986; Knoblauch and Brannon, 1981; Leki, 1990, 1991). The results reported by these researchers indicated that teacher feedback had little or no effect on students' writing ability. However, despite the discouraging results that revealed the ineffectiveness of teacher feedback, the time which writing teachers spent responding to student writing should not be considered completely valueless. As Ferris (1997) commented, teacher feedback on students' papers was still considered crucial by most of the teachers for improving students' writing ability. It allowed teachers to pay individualized attention to student writing and it offered a one-on-one communication which was not possible in the operations of a daily class. The feedback by teachers did play an important role in motivating and encouraging students to continue writing (Shulz, 1996).

The Role of Grammar in EFL Writing

As stated earlier, changes in the focus of composition teaching from product approach to process approach have altered the role of grammar in writing instruction. Until the 1970s, writing was viewed as a kind of language practice which provided students opportunities to utilize the grammatical rules and vocabulary items they acquired in language class (Ferris & Hedgecock, 1998; Silva, 1990). Hence, in L2 writing classes, error correction and grammar instruction became major or primary components of writing instruction. In the 1970s, the paradigm shifted and process approach began to draw a lot of attention from both L1 and L2 writing teachers. Emphasis was then put on the content, rather than forms, of essays. Composition instruction, as Ferris (2002) pointed out, hence entered a period of "benign neglect" of errors and grammar teaching (p.4).

However, despite the large number of supporters of the process approach for writing instruction, there are still researchers who have shown serious concerns about

neglecting accuracy and have warned of the risk of underestimating the importance of grammar in writing. For example, early in the 1970s, Cohen (1975) stressed the importance of grammar instruction and suggesting that learners could not learn in class if they were not informed of the errors they made. He also claimed that the job of pinpointing errors should fall on the teacher who had “a more abundant source of information about the second language and hence they were likely to react to errors properly whenever and wherever the response was required (p. 414). Later in the 1980s, Eskey (1983) reminded the language teachers of the importance of accuracy in student writing, stressing that students’ accuracy would not magically improve all by itself if the form of writing was neglected continually. This similar concern was shared by Horowitz (1986), who criticized the process approach for its failure to reduce the grammatical errors committed in the academic writing context.

In addition to these researchers who recognize the importance of grammar instruction, more evidence is drawn from Ashwell (2000) and Ferris (2004) who also emphasized the importance of grammar in writing. An alternative purpose of grammar correction was mentioned by Ashwell, who indicated that writing teachers’ feedback on the form of student writing helped student writers improve the accuracy of a particular piece of writing and therefore it helped to improve its communicative effectiveness too (p. 228). Grammar was thus considered essential to achieve an effective communication. This function of grammar has ensured its importance even in the process approach writing instruction because the ability to fully communicate one’s ideas without misunderstanding is the basic requirement for writing. Further manifestation of the importance of grammar is Ferris’ examination of the existing research in which she maintained that “second language acquisition (SLA) research on focus on form strongly suggests that adult second language acquirers in particular need their errors made salient and explicit to them so that they can avoid fossilization

and continue developing linguistic competence” (p. 54). For the L2 adult learners who do not have as much exposure to the grammatical structures as L1 students do, grammar is far more important to them than to L1 learners because L2 students have a smaller backlog of experience with English grammatical or rhetorical structures to fall back on (Leki, 1990). Since L2 student writers are developing writers, who are still in the process of acquiring the L2 lexicon and morphological and syntactic systems, they need additional guidance from their writing teachers to help them develop strategies for finding, correcting and avoiding errors. The identification of the errors by their teachers thus becomes important to them because L2 student writers, unlike L1 student writers, may not be able to correct errors in their writing. Ferris (2002) recommended that L2 writing teachers focus on different linguistic issues or error patterns specific to L2 writers, give feedback or correction that is tailored to their linguistic knowledge and experience, and provide instruction that is sensitive to their unique linguistic deficits.

To sum up, though the paradigm of composition teaching has changed from the grammar-focused product approach to the content-focused process approach, grammar still has its place in the writing instruction, and it is particularly important for the L2 writers.

Error Correction

The change of paradigm has not only influenced the role of grammar in writing but cast doubt on the necessity of error correction. This controversial issue, for the past decades, has been addressed by many researchers (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Polio et al., 1998; Semke & College, 1984; Sheppard, 1992). Among the studies examined, it was noted that only eight of them included a comparison between a control group that received little or no

correction (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener et al., 2005; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Polio et al., 1998; Semke & College, 1984; Sheppard, 1992). The inclusion of a control group was essential in answering the big question of whether error correction helps L2 writers because it ruled out the possibility that the gains might result from other input such as exposure to English inside or outside the classroom.

The eight studies mentioned, though sharing the similarity of including controlled group in their empirical design, did not yield consistent results. Four studies among them (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener et al., 2005; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) concluded with the effectiveness of error correction, whereas the others (Kepner, 1991; Polio et al., 1998; Semke & College, 1984; Sheppard, 1992) did not support the necessity of error correction. These eight studies will be discussed compared in the following sections.

Effectiveness of Error Correction

Among the four studies arguing for the effectiveness of error correction, Ashwell (2000), Fathman & Whalley (1990), and Ferris and Roberts (2001) employed the design with a control group of ESL college-level students who received no feedback from their writing teachers. Ashwell, addressed differences across groups receiving four methods of teacher treatment. Three of the four groups received teacher's different types of feedback on form and content, while the fourth group received no feedback at all. The comparison of the no-feedback group with the other three correction groups revealed that receiving error feedback helped students improve their writing accuracy.

Similar to Ashwell's design, Fathman and Whalley (1990) addressed difference across four groups of different feedback. One group received content feedback; another two groups received form feedback of different degree of explicitness; while

the other group received no feedback at all. The comparison between the performances of the four groups revealed that grammar feedback was beneficial for students' rewriting. This result thus supported the effectiveness of error correction

Evidence in favor of error correction was also found in Ferris and Robert (2001), who examined difference across three groups receiving different error treatments. The first two groups received error correction varying in the degree of explicitness while the last group received no feedback from their teacher. They found that either of the two feedback groups significantly outperformed the no-feedback group. This result also verified the effectiveness of error correction.

The study of Bitchener et al. (2005) was different from the previous three studies in its design of the control group. The control group, among the three groups receiving different teacher's treatments, received no error feedback but content feedback only. The other two groups received different kinds of error feedback. The comparison across groups revealed that error feedback was effective in bettering students' written accuracy.

In each of the four experiments mentioned, writing accuracy was measured and the comparison was made between the control group and the error treatment groups. These four studies produced similar findings that the error treatment groups outperformed the control group in improving students' writing accuracy. The consistent findings thus yielded positive evidence for the effectiveness of error correction.

Ineffectiveness of Error Correction

Each of the four studies (Kepner, 1991; Semke & College, 1984; Polio et al., 1998; Sheppard, 1992) arguing against the effectiveness of error correction tested for the insignificant difference between the treatment groups and the control group. The four studies shared a similar design of a control group receiving no form feedback on

grammatical errors in students writing.

First, Kepner (1991) examined the difference between the effects of the two treatment types on students who learned Spanish as a foreign language. She divided students into two groups, one of which received error correction and the other received comments on content only. She found that students receiving error correction did not significantly outperform those receiving no error correction. The result did not support the effectiveness of error correction.

Negative evidence also came from Semke et al.'s (1984) study on students learning German as a foreign language. They addressed difference across four groups receiving different methods of error treatment. The first group was the control group receiving only content feedback while the other three groups received error feedback differing in the degree of explicitness. The comparison of the performances of the four groups revealed that error correction did not improve students' writing accuracy in German as a second language, suggesting that error correction was ineffective on students' errors.

Besides Kepner's and Semke's study, more negative evidence was found in Polio, et al. (1998) and Sheppard (1992). These two studies examine the difference between the effects of two treatment types on the writing accuracy of ESL students who were divided into two groups. One of them served as a control group receiving no feedback on form while the other experimental group received error correction. The comparison between the two groups revealed that the experimental group did not outperform the control group in terms of their writing accuracy. The result was also a rebuttal to the argument for the effectiveness of error correction.

In each of the four studies mentioned, students' writing accuracy was measured and comparisons were made between or across groups of different treatments. Each of them produced the similar result that, in terms of writing accuracy, students receiving

error correction did not outperform students who received no feedback on their grammatical errors. This consistent result cast doubts on the effectiveness of error correction.

Different Methods of Error Correction

Despite the lack of consensus in the effectiveness of error correction, many conscientious L2 teachers still practice error correction in their teaching instruction. Their practice of error correction, however, as pointed by Zamel (1985) in her study of ESL teachers' responses to student writing, was not based on a clear and focused strategy (p. 88). Sharing a similar point, Cardelle and Corno (1981) stated that the types of error correction used by L2 writing teachers were rarely chosen based on theory (p. 252). There seemed to be a general lack of knowledge concerning correction methods and strategies among writing teachers. However, what contributed to the random and arbitrary selection of error correction technique, according to Cardelle and Corno, was probably the lack of consensus about the best error correction method. In fact, studies concerning this issue have seemed to be very confusing to the writing teachers for there has not been any agreement among researchers on the most effective method (Chandler, 2003; Chang, 1999; Hendrickson, 1978; Kubota, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997; Robb et al., 1986; Semke and College, 1984) In the following parts, research on this issue was reviewed to examine the effects of different methods of error correction.

Direct and Indirect Error Correction

Various researchers have examined the effectiveness of different error feedback methods varying in the degree of explicitness (Chandler, 2003; Chang, 1999; Kubota, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997; Robb et al., 1986; Semke & College, 1984). Among these studies, some argued for code error correction, stating that it had positive effects on student writing (Chang, 1999; Kubota, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997). Others

however did not produce positive evidence for code correction method (Chandler, 2003; Robb et al., 1986; Semke & College, 1984). These studies are respectively reported in the following sections with their contradictory results discussed too.

Among researchers arguing for code error correction, only Lalande's (1982) study included an empirical design which compared the long-term effects of two correction types, code error correction and direct error correction. He found that the experimental group of U.S. students of German as a second language improved in grammatical accuracy after the code error treatment. He also found that the direct correction group made more errors on the essay at the end of the treatment. These results demonstrated the superiority of code error correction to direct error correction in terms of students' improvement in writing accuracy. The code correction method with the types of students' errors identified by their teacher for their self-correction was verified to produce more positive effects on students' writing accuracy than direct correction did.

The other three studies investigating the short-term effects of error correction also provided evidence in favor of code error correction. The effectiveness of code correction was first revealed in Kubota's (2001) study in which she examined the effect of a coding system on 63 Japanese FL students. She found that students made improvement in accuracy after code error correction and they also raised their awareness of grammar. Further positive evidence for error correction was drawn from Lee's (1997) experiment on 149 university ESL students in Hong Kong with the three correction methods which differed in their degree of explicitness. She also found that code error correction outperformed direct error correction in helping students correct their errors. The students receiving code error correction, with the prompts offered to them for self-correction of their errors, were found to better internalized the correct forms than those receiving direct correction. Agreement with Lee's conclusion was

made later by Chang (1999). Participants in Chang's study were three university students learning English in Taiwan who received two kinds of error treatment. From the results of her study she claimed that teachers should avoid providing direct answers to the errors students made. They should instead adopt a more implicit method, such as code error correction, to respond to student errors. The indirect correction method would allow students to reflect on their errors so as to activate their linguistic competence. Her conclusion was in accordance with the other three studies mentioned above in that the code error correction was beneficial for L2 learners.

Contrary to the previous findings, the other three studies did not yield positive evidence for code error correction (Chandler, 2003; Robb et al., 1986; Semke & College, 1984). Two studies among them indicated that there was no significant difference between the effects of the two correction methods (Robb et al., 1986; Semke & College, 1984), while the other one verified the superiority of direct error correction to code error correction (Chandler, 2003).

The first study indicating code error correction was no better than direct error correction was conducted by Semke and College (1984). Their longitudinal design addressed difference across groups receiving four methods of teacher treatment, including direct error correction and code error correction. The comparison between the effects of the two correction methods showed that no significant difference was produced between them, indicating that neither of the two treatments was inferior to the other one in terms of writing accuracy. Though the result did cast doubt on the claim of the superiority of code error correction to direct error correction, it could not be considered as a total rebuttal to code error correction either.

The other study by Robb et al. (1986) formed a conclusion similar to Semke's. In their study, 134 EFL Japanese freshmen were recruited and assigned to four groups receiving different treatments, among which were code error correction and direct

error correction. The result revealed that no significant difference was found between the effects of the two error treatment methods on students' written accuracy, suggesting the equality of two treatment types.

Different from the other two studies which produced weak evidence for direct error correction, Chandler's (2003) study yielded a stronger argument for direct correction method. Chandler in his study examined the effects of different error treatments on 36 ESL college students and reported two important findings. First, the result showed that no significant improvement was found in students' overall writing quality. The second finding indicated that direct correction resulted in more accurate writing than the code correction did at the end of the treatments, thus arguing for the superiority of direct error correction.

Comprehensive and Selective Error Correction

The research addressing the necessity of giving comprehensive error correction received much less attention from researchers. In fact, the notion of addressing all errors in students' writing has long dominated teachers' beliefs. These beliefs stemmed from teachers' intention to tailor to students' expectations of receiving comprehensive error correction from their writing teachers (Lee, 2003). According to Leki's (1991) study on the preferences of ESL students for correction, about 70 % of her respondents preferred that all errors be marked by their teachers. This result indicates that most L2 students are concerned about the errors they make and want their teachers to correct all of them. If teachers address all the errors comprehensively, it can be assumed that the teachers are likely to win students confidence in them and thus are able to motivate students to learn. On the other hand, if students' needs are neglected, they tend to feel discouraged and teachers' credibility might be damaged too.

Despite the common practice of comprehensive error correction, there are

teachers who doubt the necessity of the laboring and time-consuming method of covering all the errors. In fact, some criticism has been raised against the comprehensive approach. Mantello (1997), for example, argued that correcting comprehensively did not necessarily guarantee students' learning (p. 128). Similar arguments against comprehensive error correction were also found in Hendrickson (1978), Robb, et al. (1986), and Semke et al. (1984). According to Mantello, learners usually work on only a few skills for each time of practice, so language teachers should direct learners' attention to certain particular categories of errors, rather than all of them at one time. Only when students are not overburdened and overwhelmed does real learning take place.

Learners' Language Proficiency and Effects of Error Correction

With a closer examination of the error correction literature, it is found that, in addition to the influence of different treatment types, learner variables are also potential factors that influence the effects of error correction on student writing. Among these variables, L2 learners' language proficiency level, compared to other variables, was more concerned by researchers (Ashwell, 2000; Chang, 1999; Kubota, 2001; Lee, 1997). Lee (1997), for example, indicated that the indirect error correction with codes should be carefully implemented to students of lower proficiency level because these learners benefited more from direct error correction. In addition, she maintained that more direct and detailed cues had to be provided for less proficient students when they were given code error feedback. These students, with very limited grammar knowledge, might fail to understand the terms commonly used in a correction code or find the correct linguistic forms for the errors indicated.

The issue of learners' English proficiency was also discussed in Chang (1999) and Kubota (2001). Chang's study, besides indicating that the less advanced student of

the three participants benefited from code error correction most, also suggested that the less advanced student relied more on her teacher's help when she did the self-correction. This finding was in accordance with the previous studies in that students of lower-proficiency demanded more attention and guidance from their writing teachers when they were asked to self-correct their errors.

Kubota's (2001) study, recruiting learners of Japanese, yielded a similar result. Kubota examined the effect of the VCE coding system (an error correction coding system employed by the teachers of Japanese to correct essays when getting students to revise for the Victoria Certificate of Education) and found that the coding system was especially useful for the intermediate learners of Japanese (p.478). This result also indicated that learners' ability to make the appropriate grammatical judgments improved with the increase of learners' proficiency. Thus, it might be sufficient for the advanced level learners to receive feedback only with the location of their errors indicated. On the other hand, less advanced students would require guidance with more detailed explanation or identification. To conclude, the guiding principle for error correction is to vary the degree of salience of feedback according to learners' proficiency. For lower-proficiency students, more detailed cues have to be offered because they apparently require more guidance (Lee, 1997).

Students' Attitudes toward and Preferences for Error Correction

Besides examining research evidence about the effects of different types of error feedback, it is also important to address the preferences and expectations of students. Meeting the students' need, as mentioned earlier, is considered important for teachers to better their instruction. If teachers do not understand what their students need, they are likely to frustrate their students, losing students' confidence in their teaching. The important studies addressing students' attitudes toward and preferences for error correction include Radcki and Swales (1998), Chandler (2003), Lee (2004), and Leki

(1991).

Radecki and Swales surveyed 59 ESL students, investigating their preferences for and views on error correction. The first important finding was that most students welcomed their writing teachers' correction and expected all their errors to be comprehensively addressed by their teachers. Another important finding, concerning the job of correcting errors, revealed that only a very small number of students felt that teachers should be solely responsible for the correction of errors they made. Instead, most students expressed approval for code error correction, stating that with the types of errors identified students should try to correct mistakes by themselves. Students also suggested that teachers take over the job of correction only when students failed to correct the errors.

In Chandler's (2003) survey of 36 students' attitudes toward the four different treatments they received, he found that students preferred direct error correction because it was the fastest and easiest way for them to make corrections. On the other hand, he also pointed out students' beliefs that teacher error feedback with underlying and description of errors "was the best way to learn not to make the errors in the future" (p.287). Concluded from Chandler's study, students on one hand preferred the easiest way while on the other hand felt that code error correction provided best help in developing their self-correcting ability.

The result of Leki's (1991) survey, however, was not in accordance with Chandler's in terms of students' preferences for error correction method. Her study yielded evidence for students' common beliefs that accuracy was important in writing so writing teachers should correct the grammatical errors. Leki also found that the number of students who preferred code error correction was far greater than the number of students who liked direct error correction. This apparently disagreed with Chandler's observation of students' attitudes toward code correction and direct

correction methods. The reason why students preferred code error correction to direct error correction was not investigated in Leki's study, but it could be inferred from the results of Lee's (2004) study.

Lee's (2004) study explored students' preferences for error correction methods by surveying the opinions of 320 secondary school students in Hong Kong. This larger sample of respondents yielded some significant findings. In accordance with Leki's, Lee found that the majority of students wanted their teachers to treat their errors using codes to label their errors. The reason for students' preferences for code error correction resulted from their beliefs in its positive influence. Students indicated that the codes, used to identify the types of their errors, helped them easily diagnose their weakness in grammar and in turn raised their grammar awareness. She also found that students' failure mostly resulted from their unfamiliarity with the meta-language used by the teachers. Therefore, it is suggested that writing teachers should give their students a clear explanation of the codes for the future use if they intend to include code error correction in their writing instruction.

Important guidance derived from these findings is offered to the ESL writing teachers for them to weigh their correction methods more carefully. When they are deciding which correction method to use, they need to take into consideration both their students' language proficiency and their preferences.

Summary

In this chapter, I first discussed the importance of grammar in writing. In the second section, I discussed the efficacy of teacher feedback, the necessity of error correction and the effects of different correction approaches. After that, influence of language proficiency on error correction is described. Surveys of students' attitudes towards error correction were reported and discussed in the last two sections.