

Feedback in EFL journal writing

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Feedback in EFL Journal Writing

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Introduction

Giving feedback to students is an exhausting and time-consuming task for teachers of writing. Yet many teachers just take it for granted that it is effective in improving students' writing skills. If there is a possibility that it is not effective, doing research to find out the effects seems a worthy activity. The result of such research could save thousands of hours of teachers' time and energy, which could then be redirected to tasks which would benefit the students more. The present study aims to assess the effects, both negative and positive, of feedback on EFL journal writing for Japanese university students. In particular the study addresses the effect feedback on grammatical and spelling errors has on the number of errors made, the length of sentences and the length of subsequent journal entries.

A substantial amount of attention started to be given to feedback in writing in the mid 1990's. The avalanche of interest in the topic was triggered by Truscott with his 1996 paper "The case against grammar correction". Truscott reviewed previous studies on feedback and concluded that if feedback, as it was given by most writing teachers at that time, could be said to have an effect it was a negative

one. Therefore teachers should redirect their time and energy to developing different forms of feedback that may be effective. He stated that teachers should not give students feedback even if they want it if it could be seen to have detrimental effects on their writing. The detrimental effects stated in the literature are: damage to students' confidence in their writing, decreased grammatical complexity and decreased fluency.

Among research cited by Truscott is Robb, Ross & Shortreed's 1986 study in which they compared four different methods of giving feedback: "explicit correction, indicating the errors and the correct forms, the use of a correction code to point out type and location of error, the use of highlighting to point out the location of errors and a marginal tally of the number of errors in each line" (Truscott 1996: 331) In this study the authors found no significant effect on the students' writing in terms of their writing ability at the end of the course.

Truscott also cited a 1992 study by Sheppard in which one group received feedback on errors and the other on content. Although no significant effect was found for the content group, the error group had a significant level of negative effect. Sheppard concluded that the students in the feedback group decreased their complexity in order to avoid making mistakes. (Truscott 1996: 333)

As Truscott states (1996: 343), it is necessary to think about the processes involved in a method which may lead to development of the language skills of the students in question rather than simply a transfer of knowledge from reader to writer. Therefore, it seems that actually correcting students errors for them would not

compare with underlining errors for them to correct themselves as errors which have been corrected can be mindlessly transferred to the next draft whereas actually correcting errors by themselves involves the students thinking about what is wrong, which grammar rule is being violated and how to correct the problem. This knowledge may not be learnt the first time, but if a student makes the same mistake repeatedly, presumably they will come to realize their mistake and correct it. Truscott goes on to say that “one should not expect corrections to have much effect on students’ self-editing in the long term and possibly not even in the short term” (1996: 349). I agree that it is unlikely to have an effect in the short term but it seems that if students are given the same feedback again and again at some stage it will sink in and therefore, in the long term it would affect their self-editing. Particularly if grammar logs are used for students to keep a track of their errors, they will certainly become aware of certain errors that they make continuously.

Obviously, in the teaching of writing, instructors are more interesting in the accumulation of skills which can be used in the future, not in the creation of one perfect piece of writing. In the pursuit of long-term effects of feedback, “Error-correction research points clearly to the....superiority of indirect feedback” (Ferris 2002: 19). That is, feedback which requires students to correct the incorrect forms by themselves, as opposed to that which entails the teacher correcting the errors and the students merely copying the corrections into their next draft. Furthermore, although intuitively it seems that more explicit forms of feedback (such as error codes) should be superior to less explicit ones, “The text-analytic evidence that exists on this question does not support their

intuitions.” (Ferris 2002: 20)

“Even students who believe that correction is a necessary part of learning do not enjoy the sight of red ink all over their writing and probably find the experience discouraging.” (Truscott 1996: 354) It is easy to concede that students would feel discouraged by the sight of red ink all over their writing, however, along with that feeling of discouragement comes a feeling of great satisfaction after have dealt with those mistakes and improved their writing. The first stage in language acquisition is noticing the gap between the learners’ output and the input they get. The red ink allows the learner to notice their errors and it thus provides the first step in the process of acquiring the correct forms. It would seem that the improvement of the writing and the subsequent high score for the writing assignment are compensation enough for the initial feeling of discouragement.

According to Ferris “Studies suggest that students are unlikely to go back and correct errors marked by the teacher when they have already completed the project and received a grade and that such feedback, since students do not pay much attention to it, has little effect on their long-term development.” (2002: 62) This suggests that any feedback at all should only be given on preliminary drafts and not on final drafts of writing which have been submitted for grading. It is easy to imagine how red ink on a final draft that students get back from their teacher with a grade would diminish any satisfaction felt about the successful completion of the assignment.

As Truscott says “concern with grammar correction is harmful if it diverts class

resources from more appropriate tasks.” (1996: 356) In this respect, the type and purpose of the class need to be taken into account as well as the ability and needs of the students in the class.

The issue of feedback in general and specifically the issues raised by Truscott were taken up by Ferris in her 1999 paper “The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes: A Response to Truscott (1996)”. Ferris points out that feedback is appropriate within a process approach to writing consisting of writing, feedback and revision but not for writing that doesn’t involve this kind of cycle, such as journal writing.

Ferris outlines three factors which need to be taken into account when considering the effectiveness of error correction: “Is grammar feedback and instruction carried out selectively, systematically and accurately? Are individual student differences adequately considered and accounted for? Are studies which assess the effectiveness of error correction designed and executed appropriately?” (1999: 9) She points out specifically that many of the studies cited by Truscott had no pre-test so that it was only possible to see where the writing got to but not the point from which it started, the researchers were therefore unable to measure progress in writing skills.

Chandler also picked up the topic of feedback in 2003 but rather than discussing whether feedback was effective he assumed that it was effective if well implemented and instead focused on different kinds of error feedback. He pointed out that some of the previous studies cited by Truscott had no control

groups and therefore, no way of knowing whether the negative effects were a result of the feedback received or other factors. Chandler did a study involving four different treatment groups: teacher correction of errors, underlining of errors along with a description of error type, description of error type only without indication of place and underlining only without indication of the type of error. He collected student feedback on the psychological effects of the feedback as well as measuring the pedagogical effect on the students writing and in addition, calculated the amount of time spent on giving feedback by teachers. In terms of the psychological effect, underlining errors discouraged students the least. In terms of the amount of time spent by teachers underlining errors was the least time-consuming. In terms of the pedagogical effect on the students' writing, teacher correction and underlining of errors both resulted in positive effects. He concluded that as underlining of errors takes less teacher time and discourages students less than other forms of feedback yet does give rise to improvement in students writing, underlining is the most effective form of error feedback.

Ferris introduces the idea that feedback can "...give students motivation for revision – for without feedback from other writers, novice writers will typically revise narrowly or not at all..." (2003: 4) She also states that whereas feedback on content is only relevant to the particular piece of writing to which it was given, feedback on form can be generalised to future writing. (2003: 21) Ferris also outlines the broader considerations that need to be taken into account when looking at the effect of feedback. "...whether error feedback is embedded in an overall approach to addressing issues of linguistic accuracy. For instance, in the particular writing....class being studied, is accuracy important to overall student

success, and is its importance communicated to students (e.g. through grading schemes, in-class editing sessions, strategy training etc)? Are students provided with in-class or out-of-class resources to learn more about problematic structures?...Error feedback is, of course, only one component of writing instruction, and only one part of a focus on form in a writing course. The degree to which these instructional components are part of the classroom may add to or detract from the effects of teacher error correction on student writing.” (2003: 50)

Leki (1991) states that whether feedback is encouraging or discouraging depends on the students' preferences. If students request feedback it would probably discourage them not to get it. On the other hand, if students would rather not have feedback it would discourage them to have it. In either case, the best way to motivate students is to give them the feedback they request.

Semke (1984) found after giving one group of students feedback on errors and one group feedback on content that the group who got feedback on content became more fluent whereas the group who got feedback on errors did not become more accurate in their writing. Likewise, Kepner (1991) gave the same two treatments to his students over the period of one semester and found no difference in accuracy on a post-test. However, as no pre-test was administered we are unable to know whether the students also started out with no significant difference in accuracy. Without a pre-test we are unable to conclude whether or not the treatment did in fact have any effect.

Bitchener et al. (2005) compared different types of direct feedback over a period of

one semester and noted that more longitudinal research is necessary to reveal the effects, not only from the beginning to the end of a course but also throughout the course.

Methodology

The present study was carried out at Kanda University of International Studies, a private four-year university in Chiba, Japan. The participants in this study are 21 first-year students majoring in English. The classes in the English department are streamed into four ability levels based on the students' scores on the Kanda English Proficiency Test (KEPT) which they take upon entrance to the university in March. The participants were all in the same intermediate level class. Because in the first year the emphasis is placed on speaking and listening skills, the students in this study only had a writing class once a week for 90 minutes. As many of the students had never written an essay in English before entering university, the first semester was spent practicing writing paragraphs before moving on to essay writing in the second semester.

During the first semester their writing teacher deemed four paragraphs to be insufficient output for students of this level and therefore they were also required to write and submit a weekly journal. In the first semester the topic of the journal was English language study undertaken by the students during that week. The purpose of the journal was to increase fluency in writing and therefore only content feedback was given. Often the feedback took the form of suggestions by the teacher regarding study skills. At the end of the first semester the teacher led a course evaluation session with the students in order to tailor the course more to

the students' needs in the second semester. During the course evaluation session there was a lot of discussion about the journal writing activity. The students voted to keep doing the journal writing during the second semester. They also voted to keep doing the journal writing in a pen/pencil and paper format rather than changing to online journal entry or a forum. Some changes were also decided on. The students expressed a desire to write about different topics so it was decided that the journal writing in second semester would have no fixed topic and students could write freely about whatever they wanted to. In addition to this some students commented that they wanted the teacher to correct their grammar and spelling in their journals rather than just giving comments at the bottom. It was judged by the teacher that as this was an issue of feedback rather than task, it would be most appropriate to allow students to decide what kind of feedback they wanted. Students were therefore told that if they wanted feedback on form they should write that at the top or bottom of their journal entry each week. In this way, if a student started to feel discouraged by the feedback they could simply stop getting it. However, because of the teaching philosophies of the teacher in question instead of correcting the grammar and spelling, the errors were underlined so that the students could correct the errors by themselves. In the same way that there was no obligation to get feedback on form, there was also no obligation for the students to do anything with the feedback.

The journal entries written by this class in the second semester were analysed to see whether the feedback had any effect on the subsequent journal entries. The aspects of the writing that were analysed were the number of grammatical and spelling errors made, the length of sentences and the length of journal entries. To

control for the different amounts of writing each student submitted, the number of grammatical and spelling errors per ten words were calculated for each journal entry and this was used as the data for the analysis. The sentence length variable for each student was the average length of each sentence within the journal entry. Sentence length is a rough estimation of grammatical complexity. The reason behind analyzing sentence length was to see whether students who receive feedback decrease their complexity in order to avoid making mistakes. The entry length variable for each student was the number of words written. The data was collected over a twelve week period; however, as not all students submitted their journal every week there was missing data. For this reason, the data was collapsed into four time periods, each spanning three weeks of the semester. Every student submitted at least one journal entry during each three week period so after collapsing the data in this way there was no missing data. When a student had submitted more than one journal entry within the three week period, the results were averaged.

Results and discussion

The descriptive statistics for the length of journal entries made by the two groups of students can be seen in table one. The group entitled .00 is the control group and the group entitled 1.00 is the feedback group.

The trends shown by the two groups can be seen in figure one. It is clear that the groups were very different in their prolificness at the start of the semester, before the treatment began. As the semester progressed, the control group increased the length of their journal entries quite dramatically. On the other hand the feedback

TABLE 1: Entry length descriptive statistics

GROUP		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
ELENGTH1	Control	88.8585	30.91753	13
	Feedback	147.5413	40.11569	8
	Total	111.2138	44.60379	21
ELENGTH2	Control	89.8085	40.17101	13
	Feedback	162.5413	89.48789	8
	Total	117.5162	71.28095	21
ELENGTH3	Control	119.6285	96.61885	13
	Feedback	170.1038	68.36247	8
	Total	138.8571	88.70002	21
ELENGTH4	Control	134.3977	77.92319	13
	Feedback	152.9163	71.30333	8
	Total	141.4524	74.21313	21

group exhibited far less variation in their entry length. One possible reason for the dramatic increase in entry length by the control group towards the end of the semester is that they were trying to increase their grades. The journal writing activity contributed 20% towards their final grade for the semester and the journals were assessed on content alone. Therefore, it would seem natural that a student would increase the length of each journal entry in order to try to increase their grade for the semester. One of the principle negative effects of feedback shown in previous studies is a decrease in fluency. We can see that in this case the feedback group displayed no such decrease.

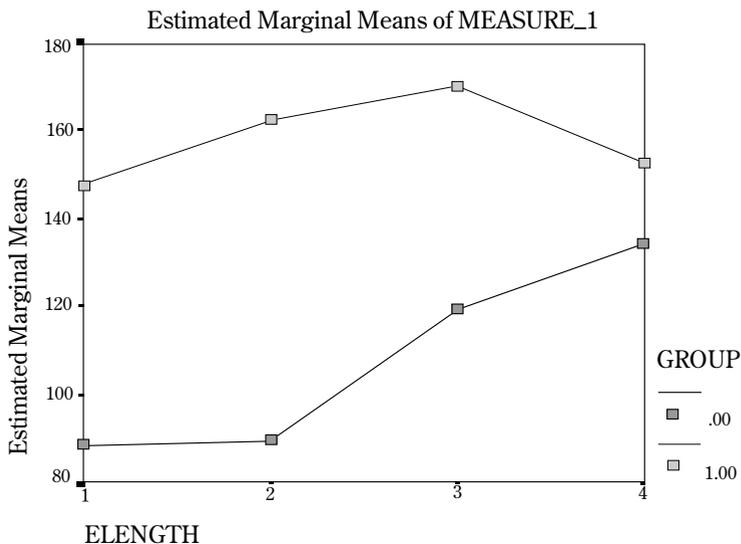


Fig. 1: Entry length

The descriptive statistics for the sentence length of each group can be seen in table two.

The sentence length trends shown by the two groups can be seen in figure two. Sentence length has often been used as a rough estimation of grammatical complexity. At the beginning of the semester the sentence length of the feedback group seems to be unnaturally inflated. The feedback may have been one of the factors which decreased the sentence length between period one and period two. However, for the rest of the semester there is no significant variation.

TABLE 2: Sentence length descriptive statistics

	GROUP	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SLENGTH1	Control	10.1069	1.75178	13
	Feedback	13.6463	3.98887	8
	Total	11.4552	3.24222	21
SLENGTH2	Control	10.5585	1.91887	13
	Feedback	12.2750	4.43967	8
	Total	11.2124	3.13649	21
SLENGTH3	Control	10.6892	1.80239	13
	Feedback	12.0838	3.24834	8
	Total	11.2205	2.47463	21
SLENGTH4	Control	10.7900	2.11917	13
	Feedback	12.3825	3.14909	8
	Total	11.3967	2.60641	21

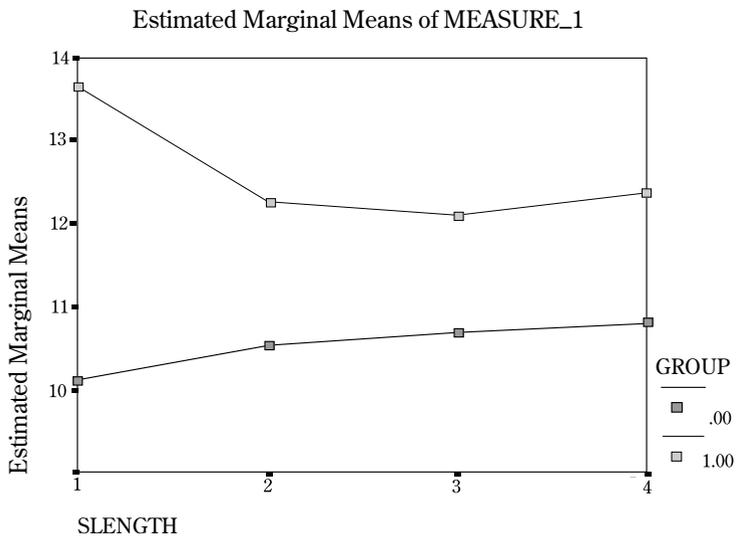


Fig. 2: Sentence length

Descriptive statistics for the spelling errors made by each group can be seen in table three.

TABLE 3: Spelling errors descriptive statistics

	GROUP	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SERRORS1	Control	.0692	.06304	13
	Feedback	.0513	.04291	8
	Total	.0624	.05576	21
SERRORS2	Control	.0854	.09726	13
	Feedback	.0375	.04097	8
	Total	.0671	.08265	21
SERRORS3	Control	.0692	.07921	13
	Feedback	.0213	.02532	8
	Total	.0510	.06752	21
SERRORS4	Control	.0585	.05984	13
	Feedback	.0300	.03665	8
	Total	.0476	.05309	21

The trends for each group in the number of spelling errors made over the semester are shown in figure three. It is clear that feedback had little effect on the number of spelling errors made by students. At the beginning of the semester, the control group made slightly more spelling errors than the feedback group and at the end of the semester they continued to make slightly more. There is no significant difference between the spelling errors made by students in the two groups at neither the beginning nor the end of the semester.

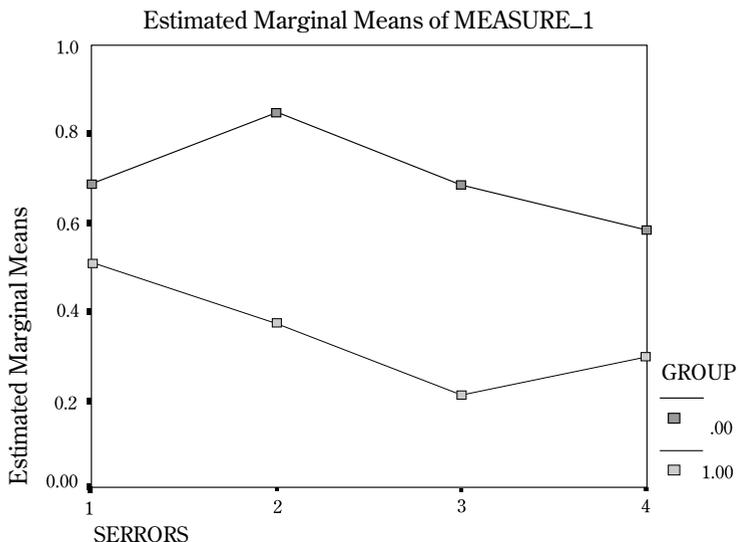


Fig. 3: Spelling errors

The descriptive statistics for the number of grammatical errors made by students in the two groups can be seen in table four.

TABLE 4: Grammatical errors descriptive statistics

GROUP		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
GERRORS1	Control	.8146	.36388	13
	Feedback	.6075	.14230	8
	Total	.7357	.31170	21
GERRORS2	Control	.6592	.23450	13
	Feedback	.4475	.21171	8
	Total	.5786	.24451	21
GERRORS3	Control	.7900	.26827	13
	Feedback	.5438	.18531	8
	Total	.6962	.26498	21
GERRORS4	Control	.6700	.24304	13
	Feedback	.4775	.23125	8
	Total	.5967	.25166	21

The trends for each group in the number of grammatical errors made over the semester can be seen in figure four. For the grammatical errors, more than for any other variable, the similarity between the trends of the two groups is clear. Although the treatment group made slightly fewer grammatical errors than the control group in every time period, the difference between the numbers of grammatical errors made by each group is almost constant.

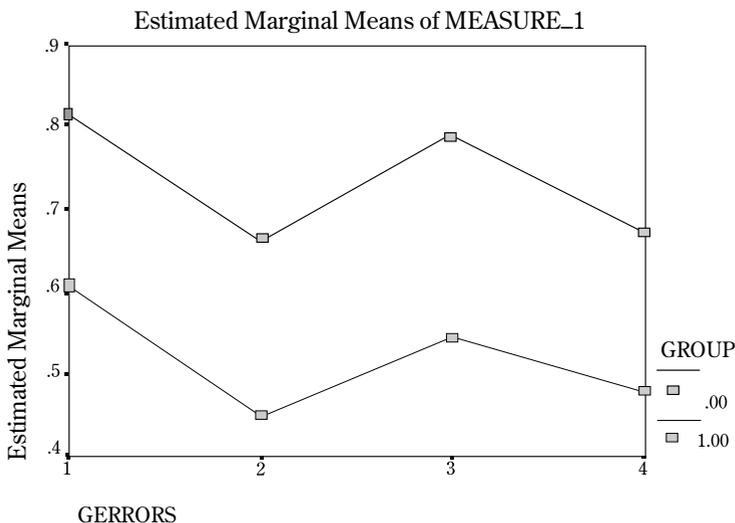


Fig. 4: Grammatical errors

Conclusion

It is evident that the error feedback received by students in this study did not affect their subsequent journal entries in either a negative or a positive way. This leaves the door wide open for teachers and students to negotiate the kind of feedback that

they give and receive. If feedback really does not lead to improvement in student writing, then teachers could significantly reduce their workload by limiting the amount of feedback they give. What can be said for sure is that allowing students the freedom to choose which kind of feedback they receive leads the students as customers to have more customer satisfaction with the service provided by the institution. On the other hand, clearly it should not be students alone who determine educational practices and policies at universities. Thus some balance needs to be found between teaching in a way that is effective in terms of language improvement on the one hand and in a way that leaves students with positive feelings about the education they have received on the other. At the very least then teachers need to explain to students what kinds of educational practices are taking place in the classroom and justification for those particular practices needs to be given.

There are some clear limitations with this study that need to be outlined. The overarching limitation is that the groups were self-selected. While this can be seen as a highly ethical way to determine groups it does not result in groups that are comparable in any sense. It seems that in this case, as would be expected, the students who requested feedback every week were also the ones who wrote more prolifically and made fewer errors in both spelling and grammar. Another limitation is that this study was carried out in just one of many classes the students were taking in the English department. While this was an intact group meaning that other learning that took place outside of this writing class would have been very similar, this is something that needs to be taken into account. Another limitation of this study that needs to be taken into account is the small sample size.

With a total of just 21 participants it takes a very strong effect to achieve statistical significance. There are some slight trends which, given a much larger group of participants, may have resulted in a significant effect.

In further studies, it would be beneficial to randomly select students for the control group and feedback group. In addition to this, triangulation would add depth to a study such as this. Questionnaires could be used to find out more about student attitudes towards the feedback they received and for even deeper insight follow-up interviews with students would be fruitful.

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