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Entitled

Written Corrective Feedback in ESL: Strategies, Approaches, Influences, and Factors

By

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in English

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An Abstract of
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This study looks at the factors that influence ESL writing instructor’s feedback practices.

Interviews were conducted with five participants who are currently ESL writing
instructors. A variety of questions were asked about their current feedback practices,
personal preferences, potential influences on their feedback practices, specific situations
for giving feedback, and workload.
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Preface

The purpose of this study is to identify what underlying factors influence English as a second language (ESL) instructors and their written feedback on students’ papers. The idea for this study came about from personal experience teaching Composition I to international students. I found myself debating about which form of feedback was the best (if any) and the reasoning behind it. All of these questions arose when I further thought about the topic: should I handwrite or type the feedback? What color pen should I use? How much should I write? How much should I correct? What should I correct? I asked myself whether the feedback should vary from student to student or if I should remain the same amongst all of them? I also wondered what other instructors do.

I knew that my own personal experience influenced my feedback practices in some ways, because when I was a student I knew which types of feedback I liked and didn’t, so I felt that carried on when I became an instructor. I knew I disliked receiving an assignment dripping with red ink covered in comments on what I did wrong. Would this previous experience change the way which I gave feedback to prevent my students from being disheartened by a plethora of negative comments? Would I try to soften the blow by pointing out what was done correctly with a few pointers for fixing the next draft? Or would the methodologies I learned in graduate school influence the feedback? In other words, do we teach the way in which we were taught?

All of these questions led me to wonder if others had gone through this same process of “right” and “wrong” in terms of feedback. I wanted to explore what other instructors use and the reasoning behind their practices. In the study, I interviewed five ESL writing instructors to find out what factors influence the way in which they give
written corrective feedback. I asked them questions about background information, current feedback practices, personal preferences, other possible influences, specific situations, and workload to see which, if any, influenced feedback practices or not.
Chapter 1

Literature Review

1.1 Types of feedback.

The type of feedback given is important to look at because not only are there many types, but there is an ongoing debate about which type is best. It should be noted that most research focuses on the individual aspects of each form and how students respond to it. Research seldom discusses the practicality of each and more importantly, which form instructors prefer and use.

Written corrective feedback (WCF) can be broken into two subcategories: direct/indirect and focused/unfocused. Direct feedback indicates the error to the writer and provides the correct version of the error (Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Mohebbi, 2013; VanBeuningen, 2010). An example would be to cross out a misspelled word and writing the correct spelling above the error. In some cases, there is a metalinguistic explanation with examples at the end of the paper or a provision of grammar rules depending on the error made (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). Indirect feedback is similar to direct feedback; except that it only indicates where there error is but does not correct the error, leaving it up to the learning to work out what the correction should be (Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Mohebbi, 2013; VanBeuningen, 2010). Some examples of indirect feedback are to underline or circle an error, record the number of errors in the margin of a given line, or to code the errors (Mohebbi, 2013; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010).

Focused feedback corrects errors based on a predetermined targeted type of errors and errors outside of this focus are left uncorrected (Mohebbi, 2013; VanBeuningen,
For instance, if a teacher focuses only on punctuation, only those errors regarding punctuation will be marked. Anything outside of punctuation, such as spelling, grammar, etc, will be left unmarked. Unfocused feedback is just the opposite, it provides error correction on all or most errors found, regardless of their error category (Ellis, 2009; VanBeuningen, 2010). For example, marking spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure all at once would be considered unfocused feedback.

This means that there are four types of feedback available for use; direct focused, direct unfocused, indirect focused, and indirect unfocused. Direct focused would be looking for one type of error, marking it, and providing the correction. Direct unfocused looks for any and all errors, marks them, and provides a correction for each. Indirect focused searches for specific errors, indicates they are incorrect, but does not provide the correction. Lastly, indirect unfocused seeks all errors regardless of their category, points out the errors, but does not correct them. With a variety of options to provide feedback, which option is best for students? Or in other words, which form of feedback provides to be the most effective and useful for students?

1.2 Which is best?

It can be difficult to decide which type of feedback is best and most effective for students. Some options provide convenience for teachers, such as indirect, because it doesn’t require correction or explanation or focused because it focuses on only one type of error and if the writer has committed multiple errors from multiple categories, it can be very tedious. Regardless of how the instructor may feel, it is most important to look at which form will work best for the writer to develop their writing and SLA. Let’s look at the arguments for each type of feedback.
Direct feedback is considered helpful for students for many reasons. First it is the simplest form, as it shows an error and its correct form, leaving no confusion or debate. Students do not have to remember error codes and their meaning (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). It also provides information to resolve more complex errors, such as syntactic and idiomatic usage (Bitchener, 2012). It is also immediately available to students to understand, rather than having to spend time searching for the correction to the error and the reason why it is incorrect (Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Direct feedback can be beneficial to both lower and higher proficiency students. Lower proficiency students may not have the ability to recognize why the error is incorrect and how to correct it, so providing the correction enables them to see the difference and explanation for the correction. With higher proficiency students, direct feedback may point out “fine tuned” errors, or in other words, minor errors that were accidently overlooked. Or even the opposite, more complex errors that are generally overlooked in a typical lesson, but once a student becomes advanced enough; these errors are noted, enhancing their acquisition.

Indirect feedback argues that it invites learners to engage in problem-solving and guided learning, encouraging them to attempt to edit their writings individually (Ferris, 2004; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener, 2012). Bitchener (2012) states that indirect feedback promotes reflection on existing knowledge or partially internalized knowledge and “is more likely to foster deeper processing during the consolidation phase of the learning process.” However, as Mohebbi (2013) notes, lower proficiency students may not have the explicit (declarative) knowledge to have the ability to engage in correcting
their own errors and problem-solving tasks. Additionally, indirect feedback may fail due to insufficient information to resolve complex, syntactic errors (VanBeuningen, 2010).

Bitchener (2012) explains that focused feedback is beneficial to students because it directs the learner’s attention to only one or a few categories at one time. In other words, having an entire paper marked with ink covering content, structure, organization, flow, punctuation, grammar, spelling, and punctuation can cause confusion or lack of focus. Students frantically work to revise and correct all of these errors, regardless if they understand the reasoning behind them. By narrowing it down to a few categories, it makes it easier to notice and understand corrections, which is essential for acquisition (Ellis et al., 2008). Unfocused feedback seems to be the least favored among the four, however, as Mohebbi (2013) explains, unfocused feedback is most valuable for the teacher because it is more authentic than focused. Students, on the other hand, may not be able to process the feedback given effectively due to limited capacity of short term memory (Mohebbi, 2013; Sheen, 2008; Bitchener, 2008). Additionally, they claim that asking students to deal with a broad range of linguistic features at the same time can result in a cognitive overload, prohibiting feedback processing.

1.3 What do teachers prefer?

While research has provided information about which method of WF is most effective and practical for students, which options do teachers often use? What factors influencing choosing the type of feedback given; personal experience, student proficiency, convenience, effectiveness, personal belief, or personal preference? According to Borg (2001), a belief is a “proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is
therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, serves as a guide to thought and behavior.” In terms of teachers’ beliefs, we generally refer to their pedagogical beliefs, or in other words, those related to the individual’s teaching (Borg, 2001). But does what one believe to be the correct way to give feedback always reflects what they do?

Lee (2009) conducted a study to look at teacher beliefs of ways to give feedback to students and compared those beliefs to their actual practices. Lee collected 174 texts from 26 secondary teachers followed by interviews with seven of the teachers and collected 206 questionnaires from secondary teachers with 19 follow-up interviews. The texts were from students in 7th-11th grade (or 12-17 years old) in Hong Kong secondary schools. One hundred and thirty-nine of the teachers were studying part-time in an English language education course from four different Hong Kong universities.

The results of the study were quite interesting in that Lee found 10 mismatches between teacher beliefs and practices:

1) Teachers pay most attention to language form, but believe there is more to good writing in accuracy – they focused on form in responses, but say good writing also depends on the development of ideas and organization.

2) Teachers mark errors comprehensively although selective marking is preferred – 12/19 practice comprehensive marking but mentioned in the interview that selective marking was preferred.

3) Teachers tend to correct and locate errors for students, but believe that through teacher feedback students should learn to correct and locate their own errors – 70% of the feedback given was direct and 96% of questionnaire respondents believe students should learn to locate and correct errors.
4) Teachers use error codes although they think students have a limited ability to
decipher the codes – only 20% of the feedback was coded even though 87% of
questionnaire respondents said they use error codes in marking errors.

5) Teachers award scores/grades to student writing although they are almost certain
that marks/grades draw student attention away from the feedback – all teachers
give student writing a score or grade even though they believe that students ignore
it because they are not required to revise and resubmit drafts for a better grade.

6) Teachers respond mainly to weaknesses in student writing although they know
that feedback should cover both strengths and weaknesses – 91.4% of WF is in
the form of error feedback and 38% of the total written comments comprise
praise, constituting only 3.3% of the total written feedback.

7) Teachers’ written feedback practice allows students little room to take control
although teachers think students should learn to take greater responsibility for
learning – 99% believed students should learn to locate and correct their own
errors while 96% believe students should learn to analyze their own errors.

8) Teachers ask students to do one-shot writing although they think process writing
is beneficial – generally time restrictions prevent students from completing
multiple drafts.

9) Teachers continue to focus on student written errors although they know that
mistakes will recur – only about 8% believe their feedback has led to good
progress in students’ written accuracy.
10) Teachers continue to mark student writing in the ways they do although they think their effort does not pay off – the question here is; if teachers feel their efforts do not pay off, why do they still do it?

As shown, the beliefs that educators have about what is the right and wrong way to give effective feedback seems to be influenced by outside factors. As mentioned in the study, time restraints prevent different methods to be applied within the class, not to mention other influencing factors such as institutional and administrative values the instructor must meet.

In another study, Straub (2000) looked at his own feedback on a single student’s writing throughout the semester. In doing so, his findings serve as a guide or suggestion for other teachers to provide feedback to their students:

1) Turn your comments into a conversation – this makes the feedback more casual, in the sense that it deletes the typical technical terms used and uses everyday language, as if you were directly speaking to the student.

2) Do not take control over the text – this helps students understand their own writing voice and their own purpose.

3) Focus on global errors; errors that lead to a breakdown in communication by interfering with the comprehensibility of the words (Burt, 1975; Burt & Kiparsky, 1972) – as this should be one of the biggest focuses of a student’s writing; are they relaying and communicating the intended message?

4) Limit the scope and number of comments – too many comments and too many categories of errors can cause confusion, frustration, and prevent the student from learning about the mistakes.
5) Focus comments to the stage of drafting – content and organization should be focused in earlier drafts while spelling, punctuation, and grammar can be the focus of later drafts to “polish up” for the final stages.

6) Gear comments towards the student as an individual – each student reacts and responds to different feedback and their forms individually, therefore addressing errors according to the student’s needs will be most beneficial.

7) Make frequent use of praise – this allows to students to know what they did right and the reasons why it is correct; to assure them to use those same techniques again.

Notice that many of the recommendations in Straub’s research are similar to the findings in Lee’s research. While these findings are ideal, how practical are they in a classroom, especially in large classroom setting where there are 25+ students? We’ve looked at the types of feedback with the rationale on which is the best, along with teacher preferences, but there is one topic that has not been discussed and is perhaps one of the most important factors in WCF; student preferences.

1.4 Student preferences.

What do students believe to be the best form of feedback on their writing? Do students also feel that personalized feedback is most effective, or do they prefer a generic overview of their errors? Diab (2005) looked into these questions by conducting a study with 156 EFL students the American University of Beirut. A questionnaire of 27 questions was given, 20 Likert-type items and seven nominal items.

Over 75% of students found it important to themselves and thought it was important to their teachers for them to have as few errors as possible in their written
work. Student also explained that grammar, spelling, vocabulary choice, organization, writing style, and ideas expressed were important features in writing. Almost 90% claimed that teachers should point out errors in grammar for the first draft. Sixty-three percent of the students said they read every teacher mark or comment on their writing carefully and 19% look at some comments more carefully than others. In regards to comments made of specific errors, 74% and 72% agreed that writing style and ideas/content were most important, while less than 40% felt spelling errors and punctuation were important.

Interestingly, 49% of students believe that during error correction, teachers should show where the error is and give a clue about how to fix it during a first draft, but during a final draft only 20% found this important. However, 57% of students felt that on a final draft the best feedback is to cross out the error and write the correction above it. This agrees with the idea that marking errors on final drafts without how to fix them is useless, as students are not able to correct and resubmit the writing. It appears that students do not prefer an unfocused approach as only 33% of students prefer a correction of all errors on a first draft and 45% for a final draft.

1.5 Effectiveness.

While it is important to understand both student and teacher preferences for feedback, the real answers lie within the effectiveness of feedback. A variety of studies have been conducted to test the effectiveness of WCF on student writing. Even though each study looks at feedback as a whole, each is individual in the participants, setting, proficiency level of students, and type of feedback. For instance, some research focuses
on the feedback itself, more specifically teacher commentary. Research on teacher commentary generally targets how the feedback given influences student writing.

Ferris (1997) conducted a research study to understand the influence of teacher commentary on student revisions. She looked at two research questions: 1) What characteristics of teacher commentary appear to influence student revision? And 2) Do revisions influence by teacher feedback lead to substantive and effective changes in students’ papers? The participants consisted of 47 students who were enrolled in three sections (taught over two consecutive semesters) of an ESL freshman composition course at a large public university in California. The students were nearly all freshman and sophomores, and most of them were permanent residents of the U.S. who had attended local high schools/community colleges. Students were required to write four major essay assignments with a minimum of three drafts each.

Ferris collected the first and second drafts from the first three assignments; first drafts had handwritten feedback provided by the teachers, and the second drafts were written after the students received teacher feedback. A total of 110 pairs of first and second drafts were used for analysis. Teacher commentary was analyzed by means of an original research model developed for the project. A subjective scale was used to assess the impact of the teacher’s commentary on the drafts. Ferris found that marginal requests for information, requests (regardless of syntactic form), and summary comments on grammar appeared to lead to the most substantive revisions. Less influential were questions/comments that provided information to students, and positive comments never led to any changes. She also found that changes (regardless of how minimal or substantial) improved the students’ papers. Revisions based on comments that were in
question form had mixed effects. Overall, longer comments tended to improve revisions than shorter ones.

Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997) examined the influence of teacher commentary on student writing in L2 learning. They addressed two research questions: 1) What is the nature—considering both pragmatic intent and linguistic form of the teacher’s written comments? And 2) Is there evidence of variation in teacher response; across student ability levels, across assignment types, at and at different points during the term?

The subjects were 47 freshman and sophomore university students enrolled in three different sections of a sheltered ESL composition course (a class that provides grade-level content and provides English language development) during the Spring and Fall 1993 semesters. Nearly all students were permanent residents of the U.S. and had attended local high schools. The students were required to complete four major essay assignments, and had to write three drafts of each paper. After grades were given on the third draft, students were allowed to revise them further for a higher grade. One hundred and ten complete pairs of the first and second drafts were collected for analysis. Ferris et al. found that the description of teacher response to student writing must go well beyond simple discussions of whether a teacher should respond to “content” or form” and that the substance and form of teacher commentary can vary significantly depending upon the genre of writing being considered, the point in the term at which the feedback is given, and the abilities and personalities of individual students.

As previously mentioned, one of the factors that separates one study on WCF from another is the participants used. Most research focuses on the “traditional” college-aged student or elementary-level student. Shintani and Ellis (2013) shift their focus to
adult ESL students. The study examined whether written error feedback has an effect of adult ESL learners’ L2 implicit and explicit knowledge and to compare the effect of direct corrective feedback with metalinguistic explanation. The study involved 49 participants in five low-intermediate writing classes at an intensive English program. The five classes were randomly assigned to one of the following: direct corrective feedback group, metalinguistic explanation group, or control group.

The groups participated in three sessions: Time 1, where they completed a background questionnaire, an error correction test, and the first writing task; Time 2, the experimental groups received their feedback and asked to revise their original writing followed by a new piece of writing; and Time 3, two weeks later, completing a third piece of writing, an exit questionnaire, and the same error correction test as Time 1. Each piece of writing was then scored. The study found that DCF had no effect on scores in the error correction test or on accuracy in new pieces of writing and that metalinguistic explanation was successful in improving their knowledge and were able to apply it during writing.

Specifically, Ferris, Liu, Sinha, and Senna (2013) also deviate from the typical participant group and instead look at ‘Generation 1.5’ students, who are U.S.-educated children of first generation immigrants who are either U.S.-born or who arrived at an early age, a group who is commonly ignored or thrown into ESL related courses without consideration for their unique background. In the article, Ferris et al. studied the effectiveness of WCF for individual L2 writers rather than focusing on L2 writers as a group like previous research has studied. The research questions were: 1) How do L2 student writers (specifically those in the “Generation 1.5” group) receiving focused,
indirect, explicit WCF describe their strategies for applying feedback to existing texts and self-monitoring their writing on subsequent texts? And 2) What individual and contextual factors might influence L2 writers’ ability to benefit from WCF?

The study used student questionnaires to analyze the students writing and language backgrounds; four timed writings collected throughout the semester; revisions marking three to four of the most prominent error patterns on the first three timed writings; retrospective interviews of each student to discuss self-editing strategies, personal feelings about the class and their writing, student background, responses to the research project, and advice to future students/teachers in the course; and an end of the semester interview with the teacher. The study found that students relied more on their acquired intuitions about the language rather than formal learned rules, individualized and interactive teaching was valued by the students, focused feedback paired with discussion activities provided to be helpful, individual factors influenced students’ ability to benefit from feedback and instruction, and students’ sense of urgency had positive and negative results.

One of the most common focus of WCF research involves the type of feedback given. Sheen (2010) examines the difference between the effect of oral and written corrective feedback on learner’s usage of English articles. Specifically, the research questions asked during this experiment were: is there any difference in the effect of oral recasts and direct written correction on the acquisition of English articles and is there any difference in the effect of oral and written metalinguistic feedback on the acquisition of English articles? There were 143 student participants of intermediate proficiency from an intensive English program from an east coast community college. The students were
divided into broader cluster groups; “two oral CF groups (a recasts group and a metalinguistic group), two written CF groups (a direct correction group and a metalinguistic group), and one control group” (Sheen, 2010). The study utilized a quasi-experimental design with a pretest, treatment, posttest, and delayed posttest design. Students were asked from each group and to retell the story (either orally or written). The teacher then gave feedback to the student when an article was misused or forgotten (either orally or written). Three tests were used to measure the acquisition of the students: a speeded dictation test, a narrative writing test, and an error correction test. The study found that the written correction was superior to the oral recasts in helping learners improve the grammatical accuracy of English articles and that the oral metalinguistic corrective feedback was as effective as the written metalinguistic feedback.

In his article, Bitchener (2008) discusses the results of his 2-month study regarding the efficacy of written corrective feedback to 75 low intermediate ESL students in a New Zealand university. Rather than focusing on a single group of students, Bitchener uses four groups with various forms of feedback (direct corrective feedback, written and oral metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback and written metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback only; the control group receiving no corrective feedback) using three pieces of writing (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) describing what was happening in a picture. The use of the English article system (indefinite “a” and definite “the”) were the key points targeted in the feedback. What Bitchener found was that the accuracy of students receiving the written corrective feedback in the immediate post-test outperformed those in the control group and the level of performance was retained two months later in the delayed post-test.
Notice that although there is variety within previous WCF research, all are similar in that they regard handwritten feedback. The studies look at how the feedback influences student’s writing and little has expanded past this. However, there are other factors that research overlooks that could influence how feedback is perceived and interpreted.

For instance, Dukes and Albanesi (2013) conducted a study to determine whether the color of the grading pen impacted student reactions to the grading process. The study used four versions of a vignette that presented essay questions, an answer by a hypothetical student (either a strong or weak essay), comments by a hypothetical instructor, and a grade. The comments by the instructor were in either red or aqua colored font. The participants were 199 undergraduate sociology students and were presented one of the four vignettes at random. Students were asked to read the vignette, to give their reactions using five Likert-type items, and give a grade to the vignette. The results did not support the hypothesis that the higher quality essay with aqua pen would result in higher scores in terms of the instrumental aspect of teaching, but did however support the hypothesis that a higher quality essay and aqua pen resulted higher scores on the expressive aspects of teaching.

With the increased development and use of technology, Yeh and Lo (2009) focus their research experiment on the use of online written feedback to student writings using Online Annotator for EFL. The experiment was focused to find the answer to the following question: What is the relative effectiveness of computer-based corrective feedback versus paper-based corrective feedback on ESL students’ error recognition? Yeh and Lo hypothesized that “the system is helpful for developing ESL students’
Participants in the study were 50 freshman from a Taiwan university studying Applied Foreign Languages, assigned randomly to one of two English Writing classes (25 students per class) taught by the same instructor under the same conditions. The native language of all students was Chinese. One class was assigned as Group A, belonging to the experiential group receiving corrective feedback with the online system, while Group B belonged to the control group receiving paper-based feedback. All participants wrote a short essay about their favorite celebrities using the document maker in Online Annotator for EFL. The control group’s work was printed to be scored by a trained rater by hand, while the experimental group’s work was scored by the same trained rater using the annotation editor of Online Annotator for EFL.

In a later class, the participants were asked to write an essay relating to their freshman life in past tense. The grading procedure was the same as the previous writing. Afterwards, the participants were asked to apply error correcting practices in a paper-based way for the document provided by the instructor (a student text with naturally occurring errors). The students handwrote feedback and comments on the text along with corresponding error types. Results of the experiment showed that the experiential group using the online system effectively identified more errors than the control group and missed a lesser number of incorrect texts than the control group.

1.6 Analyzing previous research on Written Corrective Feedback.

While there are many studies that have been conducted about the effectiveness of WCF on student writing, there are also many limitations within these studies. As
Guénette (2007) mentions, the populations of most research lacks the control of proficiency between students. In other words, we can’t assume that all students of the class were of the same level of proficiency and therefore the results from these studies may be skewed as proficiency levels could influence the effectiveness of feedback. However, the subjects do come from a natural group in that they are generally already enrolled in the classrooms where experiments took place (Guénette, 2007) decreasing the chance of bias towards picking and choosing specific students to study.

Another problem that Guénette (2008) notes is the lack of a true control group. This group would have no type of feedback given on any of their work. But as many would agree that this option is not only unfair to those students but unethical. However, there are many of us who have received assignments and drafts back with a simple checkmark or letter grade and nothing more on the paper; quite frustrating as a writer. Yet, in a writing class, this wouldn’t work quite as easily as in a writing course we should be guiding students to find their voice, become better writers, and become better in their second language. But as with any experiment, a true control group is necessary to ultimately compare the effectiveness of WCF. Doing so would provide one of two things: the development of pedagogical techniques to address grammatical needs of learners without the use of feedback or confirm that time spent correcting errors in not in vain (Guénette, 2008).

The studies previously mentioned are cross-sectional, which means they only show the short term effectiveness of WCF (Guénette, 2008) and does not conclude on the long term effectiveness of WCF, if it exists. She mentions the procedural aspect of previous studies in that it is important that design parameters must remain constant (same
activities, instructor, writing topics, etc) when comparing different types of feedback. However, this is not always the case within studies and therefore if different parameters occur, how can the effects of feedback be isolated (Guénette, 2008)? One of the most important factors that all research should consider is student motivation and student incentive. As Guénette (2008) explains, this factor should be carefully controlled as this can influence the results of the study. Typically the incentive is a grade for both the assignment and the end grade for the course, both of which will influence the motivation to pay attention and make corrections accordingly. Guénette (2008) suggests that rather than give a specific grade, giving points for completing the writing assignment may minimize the influence of student incentive.

1.7 Opposition to Written Corrective Feedback.

While almost all research can agree that WCF is beneficial and effective for student’s writing, there are some who disagree. Truscott is one of the well-known objectors of WCF there. He argues in his article that grammar correction in L2 writing should be abandoned and claims that research shows it to be ineffective or helpful in any sense. Truscott (1996) also explains that one can expect grammar correction to be ineffective based on both practical and theoretical reasons. He explains:

Consider what is probably the standard view of correction: learners find out that they are wrong in regard to a particular grammatical structure and are given the right form (or directions for finding it); they then have correct knowledge about that structure, so they should be able to use it properly in the future, assuming only that they understand and remember the correction. This view has great intuitive appeal; if correct, it provides a compelling argument for grammar correction (1996).

Truscott clarifies that this argument does not in fact work because “the acquisition of a grammatical structure is a gradual process, not a sudden discovery as the intuitive view of
correction would imply” (1996). He concludes that grammar correct also has harmful
effects on the students themselves both emotionally and mentally. Truscott argues there is
no reason to correct grammar errors and that grammar correction should be discarded.

This study is indented to look beyond the typical scope of research regarding
written corrective feedback. Instead, it searches for the influences that affect the way an
ESL writing instructor provides feedback to their students.
Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 The study.

The purpose of this study is to look at the various influences and factors that play into the ways ESL instructors give feedback. Specifically, this study looks at personal preferences, workload, specific situations, background information, and other influences that can change the feedback practices of ESL writing instructors.

2.2 Data collection.

For this study, one-on-one interviews were conducted with ESL instructors who currently or previously taught an ESL writing course. Participants were contacted via email requesting participation in the study and upon agreement were sent an electronic consent form. Interviews were conducted via FaceTime or face-to-face and lasted between 30-60 minutes. No recording devices were used in the interviews. Handwritten field notes were taken during the interview with more complete, typed notes completed immediately following the interview. Additionally, pseudonyms are used to respect the anonymity of participants.

2.3 Participants.

Five participants agreed to participate in the study and were selected based on the type of U.S. institution they work in and the proficiency level of their students to allow for maximum variation in the study. Participants teach at one of three public or private Midwestern U.S. universities, ranging in size from small to large. The type of writing courses taught varies, including: Intensive English Program (I.E.P.) writing courses, university level ESL introductory writing, university level native-speaker introductory
writing, university level ESL pre-introductory writing, free community based writing for the real world, and writing for specific purposes. The participants taught a wide range of students, starting at a basic proficiency level of students in an Intensive English Program up to teaching graduate level university students. Of the five participants, three were female, and two were male. All participants hold a Master’s degree and three of the five are Ph.D. candidates from one of two universities. Three of the five participants are native speakers of English. All five participants have taught ESL writing in the United States, and one has also taught writing outside of the U.S. (specifically China). The years of teaching ESL writing ranges from two years to thirty years, with a median of three and a half years. Additionally, pseudonyms are used to respect the anonymity of participants.

Elizabeth is a native speaker of English and has been teaching ESL writing for three years in the United States. She has a Master’s degree and currently teaches at a small, private Midwestern U.S. university. Kab is a non-native speaker of English and has been teaching ESL writing for three and a half years in the U.S. He holds a Master’s degree and is a current Ph.D. candidate at the large, public Midwestern U.S. university where he teaches. Jason is a native speaker of English and has been teaching ESL writing for three years. He too has Master’s degree and is a current Ph.D. candidate at the large, public Midwestern U.S. university where he teaches. Jeanette is a native speaker of English and has been teaching ESL writing for thirty years in the U.S. She holds her Master’s degree and currently teaches at a large, public Midwestern U.S. university. Wei is a non-native speaker of English and has been teaching ESL writing for two years. She has a Master’s degree and is a current Ph.D. candidate at a large public Midwestern
university where she teaches. The demographics of the participants can be found in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Participant Demographics. Below are the demographics of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Elizabeth</th>
<th>Kab</th>
<th>Jason</th>
<th>Jeanette</th>
<th>Wei</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native or Non-native English speaker</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Non-native</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Non-native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.A. degree</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. candidate</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public or private university (current)</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current university size</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught writing in the U.S.</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught writing outside the U.S.</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years teaching ESL writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms used

2.4 The instrument.

The data was collected via interview using nineteen questions. Questions were developed based on the researcher’s previous experiences giving feedback herself, along with data found in previous research. The questions covered a variety of topics about what influences the ways the participants give feedback to their students. For a complete list of the research questions used in this study, see Table A.1.

2.5 Data analysis.

For this study, the interview questions were divided into five sections for analysis. Section one consisted of questions regarding background information to the participant’s teaching experience. Section two pertained to current feedback practices of the participant. Section three focused on personal preferences in regards to feedback. Section four pertained to possible influences of feedback, and section five dealt with specific
situations where giving feedback may be difficult. Lastly, section six discussed instructor workload. See Table 2.2.
Table 2.2: Categorization of Interview Questions. This table shows the categorization of the interview questions and which interview questions fall into that section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1 – Background Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ How many months/years have you been teaching ESL writing courses?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ What levels are the ESL writing courses you have taught?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Where have you taught ESL writing courses? (Country names only)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 2 – Current Feedback Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ How do you typically give feedback to your students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ What experiences of getting feedback have influenced the way you give feedback to students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 3 – Personal Preferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ In your experience, what is the most effective way to give written corrective feedback? Examples: Letter form, margin comments, end of paragraphs, end of paper, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Why do you think this is the most effective way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ What, in your opinion and/or experience, is the least effective way to give written corrective feedback?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Why do you think this is the least effective way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ How much detail should be given during feedback?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Should instructors mark a given error over and over, or should the error be marked only on the first occurrence?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 4 – Possible Influences on Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Should an instructor’s approach to a student writing depend on the particular paper? In other words, do you think the focus on specific errors should depend on whether it is a first draft, second draft, etc?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Should feedback be adjusted depending on who the student is or should there be a universal or standard way of giving feedback?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ If so, how can written feedback be individualized to students based on cultural background, personality, etc?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Does knowing who wrote a paper or assignment influence how you respond to the work? If so, is this good or bad?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 5 – Specific Situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ How do you handle when you don’t understand what a student means in their writing, what do you mark, if anything?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ How do you give feedback to students whose language skills might keep them from understanding your comments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ How do you respond to a student who doesn’t follow the assignment requirements, especially in a later draft?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 6 – Workload</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ What strategies do you use to handle the heavy workload of responding to papers, especially if you teach several sections?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the initial interview questions were grouped, the responses given by participants were then coded into subcategories. The questions in section one were not coded, as it contained information regarding the number of years teaching, specific courses taught, and whether or not the participant had oversea experience teaching. The questions in section two refer to the participant’s current feedback practices and the responses were coded as oral, handwritten, electronic, positive experience, or negative experiences. The codes oral, handwritten, and electronic refer to their method of giving feedback. The codes positive experience and negative experience reference whether the participant was influenced by previous feedback experiences positively or negatively.

Responses relating to personal preferences were categorized using direct, indirect, focused, and unfocused. Section four, relating to possible influences on feedback practices, was categorized as global errors, local errors, adaptive, universal, author influence, or no influence. The codes author influence or no influence, indicate whether the participant is influence based on the student author or not. Adaptive and universal represent whether or not feedback should be adaptive to the author or if it should be a set, universal way of giving feedback regardless of the author. The remaining categories, global errors and local errors, are used to represent whether or not specific errors should be focused on depending on the stage the writing is in and the purpose of the writing.

The responses to section five, specific situations, were coded into four groups; written comments, oral comments, grade, and re-grade. This represent answers that refer to how instructors give feedback in specific situations or scenarios; written or orally. For some of the questions in this section, the labels grade and re-grade are used to signify whether or not the instructor chooses to grade or re-grade an assignment based on the
aforementioned situations. The last section, workload, was divided into three subcategories; chunking, timed, or nothing. See Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Response Coding. This table shows the coding system used for interview responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Coding</th>
<th>Question Numbers</th>
<th>Response Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Feedback Practices</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>oral, handwritten, electronic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Feedback Practices</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>positive experience, negative experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Preferences</td>
<td>6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15</td>
<td>direct, indirect, focused, unfocused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Influences on Feedback</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>global errors, local errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Influences on Feedback</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>adaptive, universal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Influences on Feedback</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>author influence, no influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Situations</td>
<td>16, 17</td>
<td>written comments, oral comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Situations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>written comments, oral comments, grade, re-grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>chunking, timed, nothing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to initial coding, a second coder was used for all categorizations and coding. The second coder was given a list with all possible codes and was asked to code each category and response to ensure accuracy in the study. Afterwards, coding from the researcher and the second coder were compared for any discrepancies. If a discrepancy was found between the researcher and the second coder, it was discussed and then resolved for correction.

This chapter has described the methodology I used for gathering and analyzing data in this study. The next chapter, the final chapter, will discuss the findings and the limitations of this study along with concluding remarks.
Chapter 3

Findings and Discussion

3.1 Findings.

This section discusses the findings of the study in terms of the participants’ strategies and approaches to giving feedback to ESL student papers, along with what factors influence the feedback practices of the instructors. First, a brief description about the specific topics of the questions is stated. Next is a short reporting of the data collected from the interviews. Lastly, a further in depth discussion of the data and it’s relation to research follows. For a breakdown of responses from participants based on question number and question type, see Table 3.1.
Table 3.1: Participant Responses. This table indicates the coded responses of the participants based on question number and question type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Question Number</th>
<th>Participant Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFP</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Handwritten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Positive Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Focused, Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIF</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Global Errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIF</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Adaptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIF</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Author Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Direct, Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Written Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Oral Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Oral Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Chunking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1.1 Current feedback practices. In general, there are a variety of ways in which instructors can give feedback to their students; some instructors prefer a traditional approach using handwritten comments. Some instructors utilize oral comments through conferences. Others prefer to make use of technological advances and give feedback electronically. According the interviews, three of the participants use handwritten comments and two utilize electronic methods of giving feedback. Additionally, in addition to using handwritten comments, two of the participants make use of oral feedback.

Elizabeth, Jeanette, and Wei all explained their main way of giving feedback is handwritten on the student’s paper. Both Jeanette and Wei also use oral feedback, utilizing conferences with students, either outside or during class time. Kab on the other hand claims when he first began as an ESL writing instructor, he too would handwrite feedback on papers, but the process became too overwhelming for not only him, but the students too, as there was less detail or the inability to read his handwriting. As a result, he switched to using digital forms of feedback, such as Microsoft Word. Jason also uses digital feedback because it is convenient for everyone; students can submit their work online, changes to the paper can be tracked, and it is easily accessible to him and the students.

Our previous experiences usually influence what we choose to do or choose not to do in our own teaching methodologies. Do the feedback of instructors result from a good or bad experience of their own in receiving feedback? Does feedback style change based upon problems experienced in past classes? Or perhaps it is influenced by what we were taught to do?
Two participants from this study explained that previous negative experiences influenced the way they give feedback to their students. For instance, with Jason, he explained how a previous professor of his would underline and checkmark lines throughout the paper without real explanation and had another who would cover the paper in markings and comments. On one hand he felt lost due to the vague remarks and on the other hand, overwhelmed by the massive amount of feedback on his paper. As an instructor, he decided he wanted a middle ground between the two extremes. Kab attributes his digital feedback to his experience as a second language learner himself where the handwritten comments were sometimes unclear and illegible. Therefore, he chooses to electronically give feedback to prevent his students from going through the same thing, not to mention it is effective, convenient, and more professional looking. Only one participant said they experienced positive feedback which influences their own feedback practices. Elizabeth experienced positive feedback from her instructors and wanted to implement that in her own class, as she feels it provides students with a sense of motivation.

However, two participants described both positive and negative experiences that influenced their feedback practices. As another second language learner, Wei can relate to her students on what works best and doesn’t based on her own learning experience. Therefore, she chooses to focus less on grammatical and mechanical errors and more on organization and structure. The veteran teacher, Jeanette, believes her own experience teaching native speakers, learning experiences from graduate school, and advice from other colleagues have influenced the way she provides feedback to her students.
3.1.2 Personal preferences. As previously mentioned, there is a continuous debate on what type of feedback is most effective; direct or indirect, focused or unfocused. In general, direct approaches to feedback include that errors should be marked, with ample explanation as to why the error is incorrect, and provides the correct form. Indirect on the other hand allows the instructor to mark the error, but the student is responsible for making the correction. As for focused feedback, the feedback is selective in that it looks at only a few types of errors. Unfocused feedback looks at all errors rather than a few select areas.

In this study, all participants find that direct feedback is most beneficial and three participants find focused feedback to be equally as useful. The participants find marginal comments the most effective way because it allows the student to see the error where it occurs and its proper correction. However, each participant finds additional forms of feedback effective. Wei and Jason also write a final summary assessment at the end, discussing major issues found throughout the paper. Wei also finds that writing general comments about an entire paragraph is also useful. Similarly, Elizabeth approaches feedback by looking at each paragraph individually, looking for specifics such as thesis statements, topic of the paragraph, and particular details. Kab, on the other hand, finds writing a letter to the student is most effective because he believes that students appreciate the effort put into the letter, provides both positive and negative feedback, and also enables him to give a lot of rich feedback on the writing. Elizabeth and Wei disagree with the letter idea saying it is a bit over the top, becomes too overwhelming for students, and students aren’t able to get the main point of the letter.
Each participant believes that indirect approaches is the least effective type of feedback, however, each participant further distinguished specifically which particular form of feedback is least effective. For instance, Kab, Jason, and Wei all agreed that marking comments without description or explanation is ineffective as it isn’t helpful to understanding why an error should be corrected, can be difficult to understand, discouraging for students, and shows little effort on the instructor’s part. Similarly, Jeanette believes using codes and symbols to mark errors as ineffective, again sometimes making it difficult for students to understand and appears as inauthentic, or in other words, automatic and robotic. Jason also believes over-commenting can be too overwhelming for students. Elizabeth feels that a focus on grammar is ineffective as instructors should focus on content and whether the student is communicating effectively.

Digging deeper into finding what feedback processes each participant uses, I asked about how much detail should be given during feedback. In general, all participants follow a more direct approach when commenting. This means the instructors are making comments on the writing with specific ways and explanation to correct the error. One participant uses both indirect and direct approaches in terms of how much feedback to give. In other words they follow the aforementioned direct approach and also use an approach that includes marking few errors with no explanation on how to fix it, leaving it up to the student.

Elizabeth explains that the amount of detail she puts in her feedback depends on the level of the student. For lower proficiency level students, she provides more detail and provides higher proficiency level students with less detail and guides them back to class notes. Kab on the other hand believes that an instructor should give as much detail
as possible because he feels students are appreciative of this and it provides an explanation to them (the students) of how and why errors should be corrected.

Jason, in a similar fashion to Elizabeth, believes the amount of detail is situational. For him, it depends on where the student is in the process. For instance, if it is a portfolio assignment, he would focus on higher-order concerns then work down to lower-order concerns. But for single assignments, the amount of detail should be focused to the particular draft (whether it is first, second, final, etc). Even so, he believes that only errors that are truly problematic to effect the meaning should be marked. Additionally he thinks only a few issues found in the paper should be marked. In other words, Jason believes that feedback should be less detailed and should only be marked when essential to effecting meaning.

Jeanette believes that detailed feedback should be given to patterns of errors, the ones that are made over and over, and less on the “random” errors found in a paper. Wei focuses more so on content, structure, and organization, with little attention to grammar. Additionally, she believes the detailed feedback should only focus on those items covered in class and any that have not been covered should be ignored.

In addition to how much detail should be given during feedback, I asked participants how often a given error should be marked. In other words, should an instructor mark a continuous error each time it occurs, or should they mark it once, and allow the student to find the rest. All participants agreed that an error should not be continuously marked in the writing, following a more indirect approach. What this means is the error should be marked several times, but leave the correct form of the error to the student to figure out. However, three participants also include a direct approach to this in
addition to the indirect approach, depending on different situations, which includes giving an explanation to why the error should be corrected and how.

Elizabeth believes that in a first draft, only the first and second occurrence of an error should be marked. During the second draft, she says that only the first occurrence of the error should be marked and in a third or final draft only a quick comment should be made about a given error. For this, you can picture a funnel; starting with marking a given error more than once and funneling down to minimal feedback about the error. Kab states that if there is a continuous, running issue, the instructor should point out the error a few times and have the student find the rest and make corrections accordingly.

Jason believes that an instructor should not mark the given error over and over. Additionally, he states that the number of times a repeated error should be marked should be less and less over the course of the class. In other words, the amount of times a given error is marked should be more in the beginning of the course, perhaps being marked each time; while at the end of the semester may only be marked once. This enables students to survive without the instructor and gives them an opportunity to stand on their own, so to speak.

Similarly, Jeanette mentions that the instructor should mark the error the first few times, then allow the students to do the rest and figure it out on their own. Her rationale for this method is parallel to Jason; it makes the students work harder and enables them to make corrections on their own without the assistance of the instructor. Wei also agrees, saying an error should be marked only once because marking an error over and over does not get them (the students) to fix the error.
3.1.3 Potential influence on feedback. While our own experiences may influence the way in which we give feedback, there are additional influences that may also affect our feedback. I asked participants if the stage the writing is in, for instance a first draft or second draft, would change or influence the way they give the paper feedback. Interestingly, all participants agree that earlier stages of writing are given feedback differently than later drafts. Specifically, the focus of the paper in earlier drafts, global errors are considered but in later drafts local errors become the primary focus.

For Elizabeth, in a first draft she looks at the basics: whether or not the criteria has been met and then follows through looking at the thesis, supporting statements, and lastly grammatical errors. Wei and Kab both look at content and organization for a first draft, and fix the “minor” grammatical errors during a second draft, once students get their ideas out and having something to work with. Jeanette starts with macro problems found in the writing first and funnels down to the micro errors. She also uses a guided review for students that focus on content. Jason looks at the purpose of the writing, for instance if the writing piece is an academic paper or if it is an application, and bases his approach on that.

When giving feedback to student papers, the instructor often knows who the writer is, based on the simple fact their name is on the paper. I asked the participants whether they believed that giving feedback should be adapted based on who wrote the paper or if there should be a set, standard, way of giving feedback. I followed up this question by asking if feedback can be adaptive, or in other words, how one individualizes feedback to the student. Interestingly, all participants agreed that feedback should be adapted and personalized to meet a student’s needs.
Jeanette admitted that at first, she tried to keep feedback uniform and similar, but realized that sometimes she had to adjust to the students. She did note that she must know her students well enough to do this, but the weight should also be placed on the students to adjust to the professor’s methods of feedback too. Wei in the same way had a standardized way of feedback, but she too fit her feedback to the students’ needs.

Elizabeth adjusts her feedback to the student because, as she explains, lower level students need a bigger push while higher proficiency level students need less of a push. Therefore, she individualizes her feedback based on two factors: the needs of the paper and the language learner. The paper’s needs are simply the requirements of the type of paper (genre, voice, topic, etc.), but the language learner needs are a combination of an individual student’s errors, and possibly a common error from a particular language background.

Kab finds getting to know his students allows him to personalize how he provides them with feedback, tailoring to their needs. He also keeps the cultural background and personality of the student in mind, as both significantly influence the way in which they write. Jason made a good point in noting that ideally feedback should be personalized, though if we personalize too much, it can be seen as unfair or biased. In turn, he asks the student to see what they say works best for them and then gives feedback according to those needs of the student.

To reiterate, when giving feedback on a particular writing, instructors are aware of who the student writer is. However, does this knowledge of knowing who the writer is, change and influence the way that instructors give feedback? For example, if a student is lazy, has had frequent absences, and has a general attitude when in class, would the effort
or type of feedback be different than that of a student who is an active participant and has zero absences?

Out of the five participants, four said they are influenced by the writer, while one said the author has no effect on how feedback is given. It should be noted that these responses appear to contradict their previous responses about adapting to a student’s needs. The reason is unclear as to why these responses appear to contradict, but there are several speculations as to why. One reason may be the wording of the questions. Often times if questions are worded differently from one another, even if they are intended to ask for the same information, can be answered differently. Another explanation for such difference may be in the interpretation of the question. Perhaps the participants looked at this question differently than the researcher’s intention of the question.

As Jason mentioned during his interview, the idea of letting who wrote a paper influence the way you respond to it, appears a bit unethical. He states that perhaps when he first started teaching, he may have been influenced by the author, but as of now, he no longer allows the author to affect him. He did not make clear what methods he uses to prevent being influenced by the author. Kab states that on the surface, he hopes that he does not let who wrote the paper influence him, however, he notes subconsciously he might. Wei has a similar view as she says that knowing who wrote the paper does influence her, however she does try to avoid this from happening when possible.

Elizabeth points out that grading is mentally exhausting, so in a way knowing who wrote a paper will mentally prepare the instructor for feedback. The real question is whether or not knowing who wrote the paper is good or bad. Jason feels that it is mostly bad because it shows biases and “asks for trouble.” On the other hand, Kab and Elizabeth
discussed how knowing who wrote the paper is beneficial because it allows the instructor to evaluate and analyze it according to that particular student’s needs or in other words, allowing for personalization of feedback.

3.1.4 Specific situations. What happens when an instructor doesn’t understand what the student author is trying to say? This problem is something that ESL instructors frequently run into. How to deal when confronted with this problem can be difficult as there are many ways to approach the situation. Two participants find that using written comments help solve this issue, one participant finds oral comments to best suit the situation, and three find oral comments and written comments as effective forms.

Despite their differences, all participants agreed there is a process to helping a student figure out a better way to explain themselves. The first step is to mark the area or section of the writing by highlighting, underlining, or circling it. Next is to mention that the marked section is unclear or something along the lines of “not sure what you mean”, etc. The last step is to provide the student with their own interpretation of what they believe the section is saying, asking if this is correct. Jason, Jeanette, and Wei also sit down with students to get a verbal explanation of the writing, as sometimes it is easier for ESL students to explain verbally than in writing.

In addition to having difficulty figuring out what a student means in their writing, ESL students may have difficulty in understanding their feedback. Often times in an ESL classroom, all of the students are not on the exact same proficiency level as each other, even if they are supposed to be. This can be problematic for instructors when giving feedback as some students will easily pick up comments, marks, and feedback in general, while those at a lower proficiency level have difficulty. Part of the reason may be the
incompleteness of the feedback, such as using codes or symbols to mark errors, not enough explanation, or information overload. Sometimes though, the student is unable to understand due to their own proficiency level, making it difficult to understand what the feedback means. I asked the participants how they dealt with giving feedback, when the student’s language skills prevent them from understanding their comments. One of the four participants found that using detailed written comments address this issue, while three others utilize oral comments or conferences.

Elizabeth finds a way to break down the comments by rewording her comments, using real-world examples, or giving some sort of relatable comparison to make it easier and understandable for the student. Wei follows a similar procedure in that she works one-on-one with the student showing them how to correct the errors, provide additional examples and explanations to clarify. Kab uses conferences as well, but utilizes them during class time and gives a verbal explanation to the student for each draft. Jason prefers using a more direct approach to the feedback, keeping it simple for the student to follow. However, he notes that a problem with this method is that it could change the student’s voice in their writing since the instructor is giving them an exact format to follow in fixing their errors. Jeanette generally does not encounter this error as she works with graduate level ESL students (higher proficiency level), but does state that if this does happen, she usually meets with the student to address the issue.

There are times when students do not follow directions, and in a writing course, this can be easily fixed in the early drafts of writing. However, in a final draft, it is too late and leaves the instructor in a bind with the decision of how to approach grading and giving feedback. Participants were asked to describe what they do when they are reading
a revised or final draft and the student has failed to follow the assignment’s requirements. In this situation, three participants felt oral comments best suit this situation, one prefers written comments, and one participant prefers both oral and written comments.

Elizabeth noted first that if a student in a final draft has not followed directions, this is concerning because there was a clear missed connection between her, the student, and the assignment. Regardless, she meets with the student as a way to hold them accountable putting them on the spot and as she calls it, giving them a “reality check”. During the meeting she will ask the student what they thought the assignment was and go through it with them, correcting them and explaining what the actual assignment was. Kab, very similarly also said he finds himself upset with the situation, but makes sure not to show that to the student. He too meets with the student but instead discusses the comments made on the previous drafts, in hopes to find out why the corrections weren’t made.

Wei and Jason are opposite of this position; they feel that being a final draft, the student should have taken the responsibility to figure out and ask questions. As a result, both grade the assignment accordingly, regardless if they followed the directions. However, both do give examples of correctly written assignments to benefit the student in the future. Jeanette very infrequently experiences this as her main groups of students that she teaches are writing for publication. She noted that if there were a serious issue with one of these students, she would work with their faculty advisor about the situation.

3.1.5 Workload. Often, instructors deal with a heavy workload, teaching multiple writing classes with twenty-plus students or over-enrolled classes. The workload of these classes can be stressful and overwhelming; having to read fifty five-page papers in a few
days time and still manage to give useful feedback. How does one deal with the workload on top of other obligations? It doesn’t seem like there is a set right way of managing the workload, as each participant had their own method for getting through it. One participant uses a timed method to manage the workload, while three prefer a chunking method to complete giving feedback to a heavy workload of papers.

Elizabeth explains that she just gets it done by spacing it out over the week and weekend, managing and organizing her time accordingly. She is lucky enough to have a lab section of her current writing class, so she is able to do mini-conferences with the students, which eases up her workload a bit. Kab also utilizes conferences because it makes it easier to explain overall comments on the writing, but he, like Elizabeth, manages his time accordingly throughout the week. Kab uses one technique where he will set an amount of time to complete a paper, and once that time is up, he moves on to the next one, avoiding spending too much overall on the entire workload.

Jason also uses a similar technique where he blocks out a set time to complete X amount of papers, though says he generally takes about a week to a week and a half to complete final drafts. Jeanette with her graduate level course only has around twelve students, so she is able to easily manage her time giving feedback. Wei, like the other participants, divides her workload over the week, but has another interesting procedure she follows. Her students complete five papers in a semester, and she devised her own calculation to divvy up the papers so by the end of the semester each student will have received detailed feedback on two of the papers and three with general feedback. This way she isn’t spending an elaborate amount of time on each paper times 5 times the number of students she has.
3.2 Discussion.

3.2.1 Shift to technology. As previous research suggests, many opt for hand written comments, using marginal comments, end of paragraph comments, or general comments at the end of the writing (Ferris, 1997; Ferris et al., 1997; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Sheen, 2010; Bitchener, 2008; Ferris et al., 2013). This has been a common practice for many years. However, this is changing as the use of technology is incorporated more and more within methodologies (Yeh & Lo, 2009). Yeh and Lo (2009) explain how technology is an ever growing field and is finding its way into composition courses.

Online learning is a fast growing field in education worldwide. It is also an emerging focus in the areas of computer technology and language learning where scholars and teachers are examining the impact of technology on writing instruction. As the online composition classroom has become more common on university campuses, many researchers have looked for innovative ways to meet the needs of a new kind of learner — one no longer limited by constraints of face-to-face conferencing.

What does this say about the future of giving feedback on student work? Will the shift of how instructors give feedback move towards an electronic form? In this study, two of the participants have made the shift towards this. One of the main reasons is the convenience. In a matter of hours, students can turn in a paper, have it reviewed by the instructor, and returned to them with all of the feedback. This is convenient for not only the students, but the instructor as well. The benefits include quick turnaround times for papers, less materials to haul around, and are less time consuming.
Another good response comes from Kab, where he describes how his handwritten notes were less detailed because it takes much more time to handwrite feedback with detailed explanations versus typing full detailed explanations using a computer. As Jason mentions, using an online system of feedback can allow students and instructors to easily track changes made, and less likely students will lose previous drafts. Additionally, it allows the instructor to have a permanent copy of student work as well. At times, instructors are left marking papers with feedback, and handing it back to the student, without any sort of documentation to keep of their own. With electronic feedback, it allows instructors to have continuous access to drafts.

3.2.2 Types of feedback. What should determine an instructor’s method of giving feedback? Many would say that the way in which feedback is given should be based off of empirical data that proves which method is the best. If this is the case, we should use direct feedback (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener, 2012), indirect feedback (Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris, 2004), focused feedback (Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009b; Ellis et al., 2008), unfocused feedback (Mohebbi, 2013; Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008) and we should give this feedback electronically (Yeh & Lo, 2009) and be aware of the pen color we use (Dukes & Albanesi, 2013).

Perhaps this is the case that all forms of feedback previously mentioned should be used. However, should this be the only influence? None of the participants mentioned previous research as being an influence to the way in which they give feedback to their own students. Instead, each described personal experiences that changed their approach to feedback.
The practice of which type of feedback to give (direct, indirect, focused, unfocused) varies across the board with each participant and also depends on the situation. For instance, all participants reported that a direct approach to feedback is the most effective. Jason states that the advantage of using a direct approach is that students are able to see the error right away, and as Bitchener (2012) says, it provides learners with the correct form of the misused form/structure. As many of the participants stated, it allows the student to see why the error is incorrect and how to make it correct on the spot. They can easily see the difference and make corrections accordingly. Additionally, it can give students the opportunity to understand why the error is wrong by if the instructor uses a meta-linguistic explanation to the problem (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008).

All participants agreed that an indirect approach to feedback is least effective. As previous research states, an indirect approach leads some students without any information or explanation as to why an error is incorrect (Bitchener, 2012) or have the proficiency in the second language to figure out what their errors are and how to correct them. Several participants agree with this, like Wei who notes that indirect feedback is often difficult to understand. Or as Kab mentions, the indirect approach is not helpful in a student’s understanding.

With this being said, participants contradicted their previous statements when they described the amount of detail that should be given and whether or not an error should be marked over and over again versus once. This is where the use of direct, indirect, focused, and unfocused feedback use depends on the situation and the student. Bitchener (2012) states that lower proficiency students benefit most from direct, while higher proficiency students may benefit from indirect as it engages students in their
learning. Elizabeth follows this almost to a tee, as she bases how direct or indirect she is based on the proficiency level of the student. Similarly, Jason starts with a direct approach, and as the course continues, adapts the indirect method because as he says, the students should be developing as writers and therefore should be more likely to pick up on errors as the course progresses.

The focus of the feedback also is dependent on other factors such as the draft or how far along in the process the writing is. All participants agreed that focused feedback is most effective and practical for their students. Many direct the focus of errors based on the draft of the writing. For instance, most participants describe focusing on content and organization in earlier drafts and grammar in later drafts. Just as the name implies, it focuses on a few select errors, and it is more effective for students because it directs their attention to only a few categories, making it easier to understand and learn (Bitchener, 2012).

3.3 Limitations.

There are several limitations within this study. The first being a limited number of participants, all living and working within the same region of the United States. By having a larger sample of participants, this study would be able to distinguish whether the data collected was a result of regional differences to feedback approaches or if the results would be similar. This study was also based on self-reports and not on an examination of the teachers’ actual feedback practices.

All participants teach at only one of three Midwestern universities, which limits this study as the opinions and beliefs from this particular region of the United States, does not mean these same beliefs apply to all participants. By recruiting participants from
various parts of the United States, we would be able to distinguish whether or not the beliefs discussed in this study are regionally distinct or represent most ESL writing instructors.

3.4 Conclusion.

The purpose of this study was to identify underlying factors that influence ESL instructors and their written feedback on students’ papers. It is clear from this study that the influences are not directly related to previous research methods and theories, but rather personal experience and influences from instructors or colleagues. This is not to say that previous research has not influenced the feedback practices of ESL writing instructors, but rather it has indirectly influenced them. I am unable to conclude whether or not these other influences, such as colleagues, previous experiences, or educational experiences have been affected by research out there and therefore cannot exclude this completely.

It can be concluded that there is a shift in the feedback practices, as 40% of the participants involved in this study have moved towards an electronically, technological approach to feedback. There could be many reasons for this change; convenience, quick response time, or the societal shift from physical paper based options, to a paper-free electronic version. It can also be noted that there is a change to being a more adaptive instructor, adapting feedback practice based not on personal preference, but rather to accommodate the student. Lastly it appears that there seems to be an open option to giving feedback. What this means is that instructors are not sticking to a strict, straight form to give feedback, but rather an accommodating approach based on various situations.
In conclusion, studies about what influences ESL writing instructor’s feedback practices has much to offer the ESL community. This study indicates that future research about written corrective feedback should focus not on what method is the most or least effective, but instead focus on two things. First it should focus on the instructors themselves because it is the instructors that can show the way in which feedback is changing. Instructors are working face-to-face with students and therefore are the most qualified in determining which method is most effective. They are able to see the rapid changes from group to group of students, and what other things should be added to enhance feedback. Secondly, researchers should continue to look at the various factors that influence the ways that ESL writing instructors give feedback. These factors are what is guiding feedback practices today and should not be overlooked.
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions

Table A.1: Interview Questions. These are the original questions used for interviews, in order they were asked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How many months/years have you been teaching ESL writing courses?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What levels are the ESL writing courses you have taught?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Where have you taught ESL writing courses? (Country names only)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How do you typically give feedback to your students?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What experiences of getting feedback have influenced the way you give feedback to students?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>In your experience, what is the most effective way to give written corrective feedback? Examples: Letter form, margin comments, end of paragraphs, end of paper, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Why do you think this is the most effective way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What, in your opinion and/or experience, is the least effective way to give written corrective feedback?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Why do you think this is the least effective way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Should an instructor’s approach to a student writing depend on the particular paper? In other words, do you think the focus on specific errors should depend on whether it is a first draft, second draft, etc?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Should feedback be adjusted depending on who the student is or should there be a universal or standard way of giving feedback?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>If so, how can written feedback be individualized to students based on cultural background, personality, etc?</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Does knowing who wrote a paper or assignment influence how you respond to the work? If so, is this good or bad?</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>How much detail should be given during feedback?</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Should instructors mark a given error over and over, or should the error be marked only on the first occurrence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>How do you handle when you don’t understand what a student means in their writing, what do you mark, if anything?</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>How do you give feedback to students whose language skills might keep them from understanding your comments?</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>How do you respond to a student who doesn’t follow the assignment requirements, especially in a later draft?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>What strategies do you use to handle the heavy workload of responding to papers, especially if you teach several sections?</td>
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