An Exploration of Private Language Institute Teachers' Perceptions of Written Grammar Feedback in EFL Classes

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Abstract

This study set out to explore private language institute EFL teachers' perceptions of written grammar feedback and also to specify their reasons for choosing comprehensive or selective feedback and some feedback strategies over some others. Data were collected from 30 EFL teachers by means of a questionnaire. The results indicated that the teachers have positive perceptions of written grammar feedback. Most of them also prefer direct feedback to indirect feedback strategies and tend to mark grammatical errors comprehensively. The study concludes by providing some implications for the field of EFL writing instruction.

Keywords: Written corrective feedback, Comprehensiveness of written grammar feedback, Types of written grammar feedback

1. Introduction

Producing a coherent and cohesive piece of writing in the first language, as Nunan (1999) stated, is usually difficult. Undoubtedly, writing in a second language can be more complicated. However, second language learners enter language courses with the goals of writing error free texts. There has been recently a debate about the usefulness of corrective feedback in L2 writing classes. Truscott (1996, 1999) questioned the value of providing corrective feedback on students' grammatical errors and claimed that all forms of grammar feedback (e.g., comprehensive or selective feedback and direct or indirect feedback) should be abandoned. Although a great deal of research has been done on the subject of written corrective feedback, it is clear that the findings have not been conclusive. Some researchers (Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003) found that the students who received corrective feedback improved the accuracy of their writing. On the other hand, some others (Kepner, 1991; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) pointed to the harmful effects of correction on students' writing ability.

While it is necessary to investigate the effectiveness of corrective feedback on students' written errors, it is also important to look at teachers' perceptions of corrective feedback. It has been demonstrated that there is a link between teachers' instructional practices and their perceptions (Borg, 2001, Burns, 1996, Johnson, 1994, Schulz, 2001). In the case of written grammar feedback, teachers are believed to have the responsibility for selecting the appropriate way of providing such feedback. Their perceptions of written corrective feedback can certainly influence their decisions. Examining these perceptions can help identify the factors that contribute to effective feedback (Lee, 2009). The aim of this study is thus to explore Iranian private language institute EFL teachers' perceptions of written corrective feedback on the intermediate level students' grammatical errors and also to specify their reasons for choosing comprehensive or selective feedback and some feedback strategies over some others.

2. A Review of the Related Studies

A number of studies have investigated the effects of different feedback strategies on the improvement of students' writing accuracy (e.g., see Bitchener et al., 2005; Chandler, 2003). These studies have most often distinguished between the effects of direct and indirect feedback. Direct feedback occurs when teachers locate errors and provide the correct forms. Indirect feedback, on the other hand, occurs when the teachers indicate in some way that an error

exists but do not provide the correct linguistic form or structure. Lee (2003a) further made a distinction between two types of indirect feedback: direct prompting of error location (i.e., direct location of errors) and indirect prompting of error location (i.e., indirect location of errors). For direct prompting of error location, teachers just locate errors by underlining or circling the errors, or they put correction codes right above or next to the errors underlined or circled to indicate error types. The latter is referred to as indirect, coded feedback as opposed to indirect, uncoded feedback where errors are underlined or circled only (Lee, 2003b). For indirect prompting of error location, teachers may put a correction code or symbol in the margin to indicate an error on the specific line. Table 1(Appendix A) summarizes these feedback strategies, with examples to illustrate each type of feedback.

One of Truscott's (1996) criticisms of teacher feedback is that it treats different linguistic categories (lexical, syntactic, and morphological) as being equivalent, when in fact they represent separate domains of knowledge that are acquired through different stages and processes (Ferris & Roberts 2001). Therefore, Ferris (1999) introduced a distinction between treatable and untreatable grammatical errors. Direct feedback, as Ferris (2002) asserted, is suitable for beginner students, and when errors are untreatable (i.e., errors not amenable to self-correction such as sentence structure and word choice). Moreover, the treatable errors (i.e., errors that occur in a rule-governed way such as verb errors, article usage, and noun ending errors) can be marked indirectly. The detail description of these errors has been provided in Table 1(Appendix B).

In a survey of Hong Kong teachers' preferences for feedback strategies, Hong (2003) found that the teachers considered indirect feedback as a useful tool for developing students' critical thinking and provided it on less difficult grammatical errors like noun ending errors. Lee (2003a) investigated the way ESL teachers corrected the students' written errors and found that most of them favored direct feedback more than indirect feedback, and all of their indirect feedback was coded. In that study, Lee suggested teachers to use direct or indirect feedback when it is appropriate. With respect to L2 writing teachers' perspectives, practices and problems regarding corrective feedback, Lee's (2003b) study revealed that although most of the teachers considered selective marking as a better idea, they marked errors comprehensively because of the reasons like the school's preference for comprehensive marking. Diab (2006) and Halimi (2008) reached similar conclusions based on their surveys of university EFL teachers' attitudes towards feedback. Their surveys showed that there were some discrepancies among teachers' perceptions.

Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of written corrective feedback have been left much unexplored. Iran is a context with poor L2 input. Iranian school students' opportunity to use English and receive feedback seems to be limited to English classes they attend at schools and language institutes. Given the significant role feedback plays, it is important to explore Iranian private language institute EFL teachers' perceptions and to specify the reasons behind their perceptions. The reason for focusing on this sample of teacher population is that Baleghizadeh and Farshchi (2009) found that high school and private language institute EFL teachers had some mismatched opinions about the role of grammar in English language teaching. It should be noted that perceptions here refer to teachers' beliefs, preferences, and attitudes that are determined through their responses to the closed- ended questions in the questionnaire.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 30 teachers (19 females and 11 males) who were teaching English in four private language institutes located in the eastern Azarbaijan province of Iran. In these institutes, the main course book covered in intermediate level was "Interchange 3" (Richards et al., 2005). This book includes activities designed to develop fluency and accuracy in all four skills. The teachers who were non-native speakers of English had between three and eight years of EFL teaching experience at different proficiency levels in language institutes. Their ELT qualifications were either B.A. or M.A. All of them got the degree in Iran. Due to the problems of availability of teachers, convenience sampling was used in the study.

3.2 Instrument

Data were collected through a written questionnaire based on Halimi's survey of Indonesian teachers' preferences for the surface-level error correction (2008). However, some modifications and revisions were done to make the instrument more comparable with the purposes of this study. The questionnaire comprised 14 closed-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions in the Likert or multiple-choice formats were used to collect teacher perception data on:

- Grammatical accuracy in students' writing
- Types of grammatical errors that should be corrected
- When a teacher should correct grammatical errors

- Comprehensiveness of written grammar feedback
- How a teacher should correct grammatical errors
- Types of written grammar feedback

The open-ended questions were used to specify the participants' reasons for choosing comprehensive or selective feedback and some types of feedback strategy over some others.

3.3 Procedures

Before the questionnaire was administered in the main study, it was piloted on a few EFL teachers. The necessary revisions were made to make problematic questions easier to understand. The main study was conducted over a two-week period in December 2010. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants. They were requested to respond to the survey questions intended for the intermediate level students outside of their work time. A brief explanation of the purposes of the study was given. Moreover, the description of grammatical errors used in the questionnaires was printed in a separate sheet of paper so that the participants could easily refer to whenever needed. The teachers were informed that their responses to the questionnaires would be kept confidential.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Data

As stated above, the teachers' perceptions of written corrective feedback on grammatical errors were explored through six categories of analysis. For the closed-ended questions in the questionnaires, percentages were determined .The results are as follows:

4.1.1 Grammatical Accuracy in Students' Writing

The data presented in Table1 reveal that100% of the teachers agreed with grammatical accuracy and thought that there should be as few grammatical errors as possible in students' compositions.

4.1.2 Types of Grammatical Errors that Should Be Corrected

The data presented in Table 2 reveal that most of the teachers agreed about the types of grammatical errors (i.e., verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, wrong word, and sentence structure errors) that should be corrected, and that correction of errors in word and verb categories is more important to them than that of other grammatical errors.

4.1.3 When a Teacher Should Correct Grammatical Errors

Table 3 presents the teachers' perceptions of when grammatical errors should be corrected. The results indicate that the teachers were divided in their opinions on when to correct grammatical errors. Although 20% of the teachers stated that they provided corrective feedback on the first draft, 30% provided it on the second draft, 33.3% provided it on the final draft, and 16.7% provided it on every draft.

4.1.4 Comprehensiveness of Written Grammar Feedback

Table 4 presents the teachers' perceptions of comprehensiveness of written grammar feedback. The results indicate that all teachers provided corrective feedback on grammatical errors in student writing, to a certain degree, by addressing either all grammatical errors (comprehensive feedback) or only a few significant grammatical errors (selective feedback). The results also show that the teachers were divided in their perceptions of comprehensiveness of corrective feedback. Although 56.7% of the teachers preferred comprehensive feedback, 43.3% favored selective feedback.

4.1.5 How a Teacher Should Correct Grammatical Errors

Table 5 displays the teachers' perceptions of how grammatical errors should be corrected. The results indicate that direct feedback (i.e., underlining/circling and correcting errors) was preferred by a majority of teachers (70%) as the only best technique to correct grammatical errors. Moreover, 20% of the teachers favored a combination of direct feedback and indirect, uncoded feedback (i.e., underlining/circling errors without coding them) as the best technique. Two teachers (6.7%) stated that they preferred to provide oral feedback in class on common errors to supplement written direct feedback. In addition, one teacher (3.3%) favored only indirect, coded feedback (i.e., underlining/circling and coding errors). Interestingly, no single teacher chose indirect prompting of error location by marks (e.g., a cross) or correction codes.

4.1.6 Types of Written Grammar Feedback

Table 6 displays the teachers' perceptions of types of written grammar feedback. The results reveal that direct feedback (i.e., underlining/circling and correcting errors) and indirect, coded feedback (i.e., underlining/circling and coding errors) received positive evaluations from most of the teachers (90% and 80% respectively). In addition, the

teachers were divided in their evaluations of indirect, uncoded feedback strategy (i.e., underlining/circling errors without coding them). Although 50% of the teachers provided a positive evaluation, 36.7% provided a negative evaluation. Moreover, indirect prompting of error location by marks (e.g., a cross) and correction codes received a negative evaluation from most of the teachers (80% and 66.6% respectively).

4.2 Qualitative Data

Data emerging from the open-ended questions in the questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively. The open - ended answers were summarized. The results are as follows:

4.2.1 Comprehensive Versus Selective Feedback

The teachers were requested to state the reasons behind their perceptions of comprehensiveness of written grammar feedback. Seventeen teachers' reasons for choosing comprehensive feedback, to sum up, relate to the following:

▪   Students are requested to write about topics that are according to their proficiency level, so when there are errors like grammatical errors, all of them must be marked.
▪   Since students are at the intermediate level of proficiency and have enough linguistic knowledge, all of their grammatical errors can be marked.
▪   Students expect their teachers to provide corrective feedback on all of their grammatical errors.
▪   The policy of language institute requires attending to every error of the students.
▪   It seems to be hard not to point all of the grammatical errors out for students.
▪   Sometimes, prioritizing grammatical errors is difficult.
▪   For better learning, all of the grammatical errors need marking.
▪   Teachers may be considered less knowledgeable by students if they do not mark all of the grammatical errors.
▪   If all of the grammatical errors are not marked, students may think that they have just those marked errors.

On the other hand, the reasons why 13 teachers favored selective feedback are as follows:

▪   More attention should be paid to other aspects of writing like content and ideas.
▪   Comprehensive feedback is time - consuming.
▪   Comprehensive feedback is effort - consuming.
▪   Comprehensive feedback can be discouraging for most of the students.
▪   Most of the students make the same types of errors that have been marked in the previous compositions.

4.2.2 Reasons for Choosing Some Types of Feedback Strategy Over Some Others

The teachers were also requested to state the reasons behind their perceptions of how grammatical errors should be corrected. Twenty- one teachers' reasons for choosing direct feedback reveal what they considered the advantages of that method and disadvantages of the other methods. These reasons, to sum up, relate to the following:

▪   Students should be told clearly about errors and their correct forms.
▪   If teachers do not write the correct forms of errors, students will not take responsibility for working out them.
▪   Using other ways of indicating errors like putting correction codes above errors or in the margin requires letting students self correct their errors and submit their revised compositions. In language classes, there is not usually enough time to let students go through multiple drafting.
▪   Writing correct forms next to the errors helps students avoid making the same errors again.
▪   Using correction codes or other ways of indicating errors may confuse students.
▪   Categorizing some grammatical errors according to the correction codes is difficult.
▪   Categorizing grammatical errors according to the correction codes is very time- consuming.

One teacher stated that she only provided indirect, coded feedback on errors. Her reasons relate to the following:

▪   Using correction codes above the errors helps students see what kind of errors they have made, and when they work out the answers for themselves, they can easily remember errors and their correct forms. They become independent, too.

Six teachers stated that they used a combination of direct and indirect, uncoded feedback strategies. Their reasons relate to the following:

▪   Good teachers should use various ways of marking errors.
▪   When there are many compositions to be corrected, underlining some of the errors seems to be better.
▪   Some less difficult grammatical errors like the plural –s endings can only be underlined.

Two teachers stated that they provided general feedback in class on common errors to complement direct written feedback. Their reasons relate to the following:

- Although the correct words or structures have been written above errors in the students' compositions, provision of general feedback on common errors helps the whole class pay attention to these errors more carefully and try to avoid making such errors.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study attempted to explore Iranian private language institute EFL teachers' perceptions of written grammar feedback and also to specify their reasons for choosing comprehensive or selective feedback and some feedback strategies over some others. The findings of the study revealed that all of the teachers strongly valued grammatical accuracy, and most of them agreed about the types of grammatical errors that should be corrected. In this respect, the results corroborate the findings of Hyland, (2003) and Furneaux et al., (2007). These studies showed that language accuracy was a very important focus for teachers' feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2006a) argued that the teachers' preoccupation with surface-level error correction might be due to the importance of accuracy in academic writing.

Most of the teachers involved in this study tended to treat different grammatical categories equally and preferred direct feedback as the only best technique to mark grammatical errors. They also agreed about comprehensive feedback. The results, in this respect, are similar to those in Lee (2008) in that his investigation of written feedback provided by EFL teachers showed that direct feedback was the most prevalent strategy, and comprehensive feedback was more common than selective feedback. Moreover, the results of this study indicated that the majority of teachers had positive evaluations of direct feedback and indirect, coded feedback and negative evaluations of indirect prompting of error location. These results confirm those obtained by Lee (2003a).

It was also found that the teachers themselves were divided in their perceptions of when grammatical errors should be corrected, comprehensiveness of written grammar feedback, and indirect, uncoded feedback. Such discrepancies in EFL teachers' perceptions of written corrective feedback have also been reported in other studies (e.g., see Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Diab, 2006; Schulz, 1996). These differences can be harmful to EFL writing instruction. Among its major findings, this study also revealed that the language institutes' preference or request for comprehensive feedback was one of the important factors that accounted for why some of the teachers marked all errors in students' writing. This finding corroborates the results of Lee (2003b, 2009, 2011). On the whole, the results of the study suggested that the teachers had positive attitudes towards written grammar feedback and valued this practice.

It should be mentioned that the results reported above are based on the ideas of a limited number of teachers that are not a representative sample of the whole EFL teacher population in Iran. This shortcoming means that the results may not be easily generalized to other similar contexts. However, the following three important implications can be drawn:

5.1 Selective Feedback

Although the teachers involved in this study were divided in their perceptions of comprehensiveness of written grammar feedback, most of them preferred comprehensive feedback. Teachers need to know that grammatical accuracy is only one of the features of good writing, and provision of detailed feedback can deflect them from other more important concerns in writing instruction. As Leki (1991) pointed out, since some of the written errors may never disappear, spending time and effort to eliminating them seems to be useless. Providing corrective feedback selectively may also improve students' attitudes towards writing. This is in line with what some of the teachers who favored selective feedback stated in this study. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to prioritize grammatical errors and to do selective marking (Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2007; Lee, 1997, 2003a, 2003b, 2008). Private language institute administrators' encouragement cannot be neglected in this regard. To improve teachers' feedback practices, teachers, as Lee (2011) also asserted, should be given support and autonomy in their own work contexts.

5.2 Empowering Students

Provision of more indirect feedback has been found to be useful in some previous studies (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997; Makino, 1993) .Therefore, it is important for teachers not to locate all errors and provide correct alternatives. They should let students find out how to correct some of their errors and make their own corrections. Otherwise, students, as Lee (2009) stated, can become passive and more and more reliant on teachers. In this study, most of the teachers had positive evaluations of direct and indirect coded feedback strategies. However, as some of the teachers mentioned, there are problems with the use of indirect - coded feedback. In order to cope with the above-mentioned problems, the following suggestions are made:

- Help students understand how such a feedback strategy can improve their writing (Ferris & Robert, 2001).
- Teach them explicitly what the correction codes refer to.
- Make certain that students understand the grammatical rules involved (Ferris, 2002).

▪　Do not use the large number of correction codes because students may become confused. In other words, use a list of correction codes that students can manage.

5.3 Using Other Feedback Strategies

Apart from written feedback strategies, the literature on written corrective feedback has attached importance to the use of other feedback techniques (Ferris, 2002; Lee, 2003b; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). Accordingly, teachers have been recommended to use written corrective feedback in conjunction with other strategies like oral feedback, individual conferences, and peer-editing to compensate for the shortcomings of such feedback. Unfortunately, only two teachers involved in this study stated that they provided oral feedback on common errors in class to supplement written direct feedback. This means that most of the teachers used only a very small range of feedback strategies.

It is also worth noting that teacher training in written corrective feedback can play an important role in the efficacy of such feedback. Teacher education and teacher training programs should include sessions on written corrective feedback. These sessions build up teachers' teaching skills, provide them with the necessary knowledge about grammar feedback, and help them modify any unrealistic beliefs and opinions that they have. Feedback strategies, as Lee (2011) asserted, cannot work if teachers do not believe that these strategies can work.

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Table 1. Perceptions of Grammatical Accuracy in Students' Writing

Grammatical accuracy	Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree/agree	30	100 %
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree/ disagree	0	0%
Total	30	100%

Table 2. Perceptions of Types of Grammatical Errors that a Teacher Should Correct

Grammatical errors					
	Verb errors	Noun ending errors	Article errors	Wrong word	Sentence errors
Responses	T	T	T	T	T
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
	F	F	F	F	F
Strongly agree / agree	90% (27)	76.7% (23)	80% (24)	93.3% (28)	83.3% (25)
Neither agree nor disagree	10% (3)	23.3% (7)	20% (6)	6.7% (2)	16.7% (5)
Strongly disagree/ disagree	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Total	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (30)

Note: T: Teachers, F: Frequency, %: Percent

Table 3. Perceptions of When a Teacher Should Correct Grammatical Errors

Drafts	Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent
On the first draft	6	20%
On the second draft	9	30%
On the final draft	10	33.3%
On every draft	5	16.7%
On other drafts	0	0%
Total	30	100%

Table 4. Perceptions of Comprehensiveness of Written Grammar Feedback

Comprehensiveness	Teachers	
	Frequency	percent
Comprehensive feedback	17	56.7%
Selective feedback	13	43.3%
No grammar feedback	0	0%
Total	30	100%

Table 5. Perceptions of How a Teacher Should Correct Grammatical Errors

Feedback strategies	Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent
Direct feedback	21	70%
Indirect,uncoded feedback	0	0%
Indirect, coded feedback	1	3.3%
Indirect prompting of error location by marks (e.g., a cross)	0	0%
Indirect prompting of error location by correction codes	0	0%
Combined (a direct-indirect, uncoded feedback)	6	20%
Other (direct feedback + oral feedback in class on common errors)	2	6.7%
Total	30	100%

Table 6. Perceptions of Types of Written Grammar Feedback

Types of written corrective feedback					
	Direct feedback	Indirect, uncoded feedback	Indirect, coded feedback	Indirect prompting of error location by marks (e.g., a cross)	Indirect prompting of error location by correction codes
Responses	T (%) F	T (%) F	T (%) F	T (%) F	T (%) F
Very good/ good	90% (27)	50% (15)	80% (24)	13.3% (4)	16.7% (5)
Neither good nor bad	10% (3)	13.3% (4)	13.3% (4)	6.7% (2)	16.7% (5)
Very bad/bad	0% (0)	36.7% (11)	6.7% (2)	80% (24)	66.6% (20)
Total	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (30)	100% (30)

Note: T: Teachers, F: Frequency, %: Percent

Appendix A: Types of Written Grammar Feedback

Types of feedback strategy		Explanation	Example
Direct feedback		-Teachers locate and correct errors.	Has went ^{gone}
Indirect feedback	Direct prompting of error location	-Teachers locate errors. -Teachers locate errors and indentify error types.	Has went Has went ^{verb form}
	Indirect prompting of error location	-Teachers indirectly locate errors. -Teachers indirectly locate errors and identify error types.	e.g., by putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on specific line e.g., by writing "verb form" (or "v") in the margin to indicate a verb form error on specific line

(adapted from Lee, 2003a)

Appendix B: Types of Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors	Meaning	Examples
Verb errors	Errors in verb tense or form	- I <u>meet</u> her last week. - We have not <u>complete</u> the project yet.
Noun ending errors	Noun ending (plural or possessive) missing or wrong	- These book ø are mine. - My father ø car is new.
Article errors	Article (a, an, the) or other determiner (some, any, much,...) missing or wrong	- There are <u>much</u> books on the table - I live in <u>the</u> Tabriz.
Wrong word	All types of lexical errors in word choice or form, including preposition and pronoun errors	-My mother <u>learned</u> me how to ride a car bike. - I was very interested <u>at</u> history.
Sentence structure errors	Errors related to sentence/clause boundaries	- My father took the <u>bus. Because</u> the bank was not near.
	Wrong word order	- What <u>you are</u> doing?
	Omitting words or phrases from a sentence	- I know ø he is. He is at the park.
	Insertion of unnecessary words or phrases	- The woman whom I saw <u>her</u> was my teacher.