

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background and Motivation

For many English teachers in senior high schools in Taiwan, one of the most frustrating and discouraging tasks is to correct errors and then see them recur in students' writing. A large number of EFL writing teachers in senior high schools, as can be observed, regard error feedback as not only a must but also a responsibility they have to take. In their teaching of writing, they tend to incorporate error feedback into their writing instruction, spending a large portion of time in correcting errors found in their students' writing. The error correction method most commonly utilized by the teachers is correcting lexical or grammatical errors with the provision of correct answers, which is categorized as the "more-direct method" by Frodesen and Holten (2003). However, from time to time, the EFL writing teachers find that they are correcting the same errors again and again, and this nagging feeling starts to challenge the belief that their effort can pay off in terms of students' performance. They begin to wonder whether the time and effort spent addressing errors is time well spent and whether the efforts in error correction actually translate into student learning.

In fact, this similar concern has been shared by many researchers and practitioners. An examination of the error correction literature reveals that the effect of error correction on students' writing has become a controversial issue frequently discussed by ESL and EFL researchers. They have investigated the effects of different error correction approaches but no consensus has been reached. Just as Lee (2004) pointed out in her study, "whether teachers should correct errors in student writing and how they should go about it" have been the topic of constant debate among many

researchers (p.285). Some of them are in favor of error feedback, claiming that their studies point to its usefulness (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Lalande, 1982; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998); whereas others cast doubts on its benefits, suggesting that error correction is not effective as a means to improve student writing (Cohen & Robbins, 1976; Hendrickson, 1981; Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2004;).

Apart from the inconclusive evidence addressing the effectiveness of error correction, there is also research aiming to find a better method of error correction (Chadler, 2003; Chang, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997; Robb, et al., 1986). In these studies, the effects of various types of error feedback on ESL or EFL writing were examined and some interesting findings were yielded. Among these findings, though there was no consensus of what “the best method” was, many of them suggested that the traditional correction with the correct form provided should not be considered as the best and the only way to provide students feedback. They even indicated that a less explicit way might be sufficient to serve the purpose of helping students improve their writing. This piece of evidence seems to contradict with the practices and beliefs of many senior high school EFL writing teachers in the local context of Taiwan. This study is conducted with the hope to find a better method of error correction for teachers and students in the local high-school learning context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the effects of two correction methods on high school students’ writing quality and accuracy at two writing proficiency levels. It also surveys students’ attitudes toward the two correction methods implemented. To achieve the purposes of the study, five research questions are addressed:

1. Is code error correction more effective than the direct error correction in improving student writing quality?

2. Is code error correction more effective than the direct error correction in improving student writing accuracy?
3. How do the effects of the two methods differ on the writing quality of students at different writing proficiency?
4. How do the effects of the two methods differ on the writing accuracy of students at different writing proficiency?
5. How do the error correction group and the direct error correction group differ in their attitudes toward the implemented correction methods at the end of the experiment?

Definitions of Key Terms

Error

According to Zydatis (1974), error correction is regarded as a pedagogic strategy towards reinforcing correct surface forms and inhibiting incorrect forms. In psycholinguistics, it refers to mistakes attributable to a malfunctioning of the neuromuscular commands from the brain (Crystal, 1997, p. 139). In this study, it refers to the incorrect use of a linguistic item showing faulty or incomplete learning (Richards, 1998, p. 160). In writing research, there are two distinct kinds of errors identified. Burt (1975) distinguishes “global errors” from “local errors,” considering the former as errors affecting the overall sentence organization (e.g., wrong order, missing or misplaced connectors) while the latter as errors affecting only single elements in a sentence (e.g., noun and verb inflections, articles). According to this definition, local errors are lower-level errors, such as errors in grammatical structures, words or expressions. As to global errors, they involve meaning-level concerns (Chen, 1997). In this study, attention is paid to both the local errors and the global ones because either kind of errors affects students’ writing accuracy.

Error Correction

Error correction, also called “error feedback” or “error treatment”, is the teacher’s corrective feedback on students’ errors in writing. It is limited to comments on grammatical errors. In this study, “error correction” does not refer specifically to a particular error feedback method in which model answers are provided for student errors. Instead, it incorporates other correction methods as well, such as the indication of the locations or the indication of the types of errors (Lee, 2004).

Direct Error Correction and Indirect Error Correction

Either direct or indirect error correction is a form of error feedback implemented by language teachers. Direct error correction, also called “direct error feedback” or “direct error treatment”, is the most explicit method of error correction. In this study, direct error correction refers to the writing teacher’s provision of correct linguistic forms or structures for student errors (Ferris, 2002; Lee, 2004). It may include rewritten sentences, deleted words or morphemes, and the correct forms of misspelled or wrongly-used words or phrases.

The other category of error feedback is indirect error correction, a less explicit error correction method than direct error correction. Unlike direct error correction, no correct language forms or structures are offered in indirect error correction and the indicated errors are left to students for them to correct. It includes indicating the number of errors made in each line, underlining the errors to indicate their locations, or labeling the types of errors committed. Among the various kinds of indirect error feedback, a more explicit way called “code error correction” is used in this study to indicate both the locations and the types of errors committed by students in their writing.

Comprehensive and Selective Error Correction

Comprehensive error correction refers to the error feedback, either the direct or indirect method, which addresses all errors in student writing. In other words, teachers implementing comprehensive error correction correct student errors comprehensively. On the contrary, selective error correction, as its name suggests, involves correcting a limited number of language structures consistently over a period of time (Mantello, 1997). In this study, comprehensive error correction is used and all student errors are addressed by the researcher.

Significance of the Study

For several decades, though error correction has been a topic of constant debate in the field of writing research, many empirical studies investigated its effect on ESL or EFL college level students or adult learners. A review of literature has revealed that very few empirical studies were conducted to explore its effect on the writing quality and accuracy of high school EFL students in Taiwan local learning context. The present study of pre-post empirical design first compares the effects of two error correction methods on the quality and accuracy of high school EFL student writing and later investigates students' opinions about correction methods. Its expected results help high school writing teachers weigh their error feedback options more carefully. When a more appropriate correction method is found to tailor to the needs of high school students of different writing proficiency, it can be incorporated in the real instruction of writing teachers when they give feedback on student writing. It is expected that a less time-consuming and more economical method will make their error correction less formidable and more effective.

Organization of the Thesis

The present thesis contains five chapters. Chapter One introduces the motivation of the study, purpose of the study, research questions, and definition of the terms used in this study. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature. Chapter Three specifies the research design of the present study, including participants, setting, data collection and analysis as well as instrumentation. In Chapter Four the results of the study are first reported and then discussed. Chapter Five summarizes the major findings of the study, also providing some pedagogical implications, limitations of the study and suggestions for future studies.