# TWO DIFFERENT FEEDBACK PROCEDURES GIVEN TO STUDENTS' WRITING

## ÖĞRENCİLERİN KOMPOZİSYONLARINA VERİLEN İKİ FARKLI GERİBİLİRİM YÖNTEMİ

Umman TÜMKAYA*    Gölge SEFEROĞLU**

**ABSTRACT:** This study aims to compare two teacher-written feedback procedures (total feedback via error codes vs. selective feedback via general comments) for the students' structural errors – grammar, vocabulary, mechanics. For this purpose, two groups of students in the Department of Basic English at Middle East Technical University were given feedback on their writing with the above mentioned techniques for eight weeks and their performance was tested in a writing exam at the end of the study.

The analysis of the data collected through the post-test indicated that the different treatments applied proved no difference in terms of improving students' accurate language use. The results, however, suggest that teachers do not need to spend hours to give feedback on all errors; selective feedback via general comments will help students improve their writing to a comparable level.

**Key words:** writing, total feedback, selective feedback, error code, general comments.

**ÖZET:** Bu çalışmanın amacı öğrencilerin İngilizce kompozisyonlarındaki yapısal hatalarına (dilbilgisi, kelime, yazım ve imla) verilen iki farklı geribildirim yöntemini (tüm hataları kodlama ile seçilmiş hatalara genel yorumlar yazma) karşılaştırmaktır. Bu amaçla, iki grup öğrenciye 8 hafta boyunca yukarıda belirtilen teknikler kullanılarak geribildirim verilmiş ve çalışma sonunda bir yazılı sınavla performansları test edilmiştir.

Test sonuçlarından elde edilen veriler, iki grubun ortalamaları arasında belirgin bir fark olmadığını ortaya koymuştur. Böylece, uygulanan iki farklı geribildirim yönteminin, öğrencinin doğru dil kullanımını geliştirmede bir fark yaratmadığı görülmüştür. Bunun yanında, öğretmenlerin öğrenci kompozisyonlarındaki tüm hatalara geribildirim vermek için saatlerini harcamaları gerekmeyebileceği, genel yorumlar yoluyla verilen seçici geribildirimin öğrenci kompozisyonlarını eşdeğer düzeyde geliştirebileceği görülmüştür.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** kompozisyon, tüm hatalara verilen geribildirim, seçici geribildirim, hata kodları, genel yorumlar.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Second/foreign language research attaches great importance to the role of errors in second/foreign language acquisition. Most researchers have viewed errors as windows to the language acquisition process and as the reflections of the learners' internalized knowledge of language (Al-Mekhlafi, 1997). Making mistakes indicates that a person is taking risks and learning. Therefore, an effective teacher encourages his learners to make mistakes and when they make mistakes, he provides the necessary support to help them improve themselves.

This support is especially imperative for students' written work. As the emphasis in writing has shifted from the end product to the writing process itself, that is, from the product approach to the process approach, the role of teacher feedback in the multiple-draft process has become more important. In the product approach, the end product is given great emphasis; therefore, students submit a piece of writing to the teacher to be graded and when the teacher gives it back, it is usually thrown away and forgotten as the students start a new writing. However, in the process approach, the feedback given by the teacher will help the learners see their mistakes and weaknesses and encourage them to overcome the problems in order to write better in the following drafts. This process is

---

\*    Instructor, METU, Department of Basic English-Ankara. ummans@yahoo.com.

\*\* Assist. Prof. Dr. METU, Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Education-Ankara. golge@metu.edu.tr.

believed to help learners more improve their writing proficiency (Muncie, 2000; Myers, 1997).

Giving effective feedback to EFL (English as a foreign language) students' essays has been a hot issue over the last 30 years as the process approach to writing has become popular in EFL composition classes. There is a strong agreement among researchers regarding the importance of written feedback in promoting a better and appropriate learning in this process (Al-Mekhlafi, 1997; Enginarlar, 1993; Muncie, 2000). However, there are many different ideas as to how this feedback should be given. Since teachers spend a considerable amount of time and effort on writing feedback, many researchers try to find the best and the most effective way to improve students' writing and to save teachers' time.

One argument is about direct versus indirect corrections. As Mahili (1994) argues, direct corrections have proven ineffective and Enginarlar (1993) states that direct corrections of the teacher tend to have negative effects on students' attitudes as well as on their essays. It is mostly agreed that correction should be done indirectly, pushing students to self-correct and in some way, be motivated to revise their work.

Another argument is on total versus selective correction. In Bright and McGregor (1983), it is stated that every error should be corrected because they do harm as they help to confirm a bad habit. However, according to the recent theories on language acquisition and teacher methodology, all errors should not be corrected. Selective correction is argued to be more effective than total correction; therefore, teachers should be selective in correcting the errors; they should prioritize the errors and give clear feedback (Ancker, 2000; Celce-Murcia, 1985; Ferris, 1999).

Different studies have focused on different types of feedback comparing two or more and trying to find which one is better. It is claimed that overt correction may have negative effects on students' subsequent compositions or on their attitudes to writing. In Lalande's study (1982) supporting this argument, the students who were given error codes as feedback were found to be more successful than those whose errors were directly corrected by the teacher (cited in Ashwell, 2000). Therefore, the two techniques – coding all and correcting all- have been compared and the conclusion is that coding all errors is more effective than correcting all errors.

However, this brings out another argument. Most of the other studies claim that teachers should not focus on all errors (Ancker, 2000; Celce-Murcia, 1985; Ferris & Roberts 2001). Ferris (1999) argues that teachers should prioritize the most frequent and serious grammar problems of students and use selective error feedback. In this way, the teachers will not spend a lot of time dealing with each problem in all student essays. Also, they will be more accurate and thorough in their feedback. Therefore, this study will compare two different feedback techniques which are highlighting all errors using error codes and commenting on the errors which the teacher prioritizes according to their importance and frequency.

## 2. METHOD

The study followed a quasi-experimental research design. It was aimed to compare two types of written teacher feedback –using error codes to highlight all structural errors and using end-of-text comments for selected structural errors. The research was carried out in two upper-intermediate classes in the Department of Basic English at Middle East Technical University. This study intended to answer the following research question:

*Will EFL students at the upper-intermediate level who are given written teacher feedback to their essays via general comments for the selected structural errors achieve better in the post-test in terms of grammar accuracy than the students who are provided written feedback by means of error codes for all their structural errors?*

The students in both groups were compared with regard to their age level, the field of study, English language background, and the previous-term total grades. The findings of this research indicated that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of their proficiency in English or other characteristics. The ages of the students in the experimental group were 18 and 19 with a mean age of 18.6. All of them were Turkish students who had just graduated from high school. These students indicated a range of seven to eleven years of education in English with a mean of 7.9. The students reported enrollment in 9 departments. They represented the following departments: Mining Engineering (20%), Mechanical Engineering (10%), Computer Engineering (10%), Metallurgical Engineering (10%), Petroleum Engineering (10%), Civil Engineering (10%), Industrial Engineering (10%), Physics (10%), and Sociology (10%). The mean of the students' grades of the intermediate course they had attended in the previous semester was 34.2 out of 45.

The ages of the students in the control group ranged from 18 to 20 with a mean age of 18.8. These students were also Turkish and they had just completed their high school education. The students had had education in English for about four to eleven years with a mean of 7.9. The students reported enrollment in 7 departments. They represented the following departments: Electrical and Electronics Engineering (30%), Architecture (20%), Food Engineering (10%), Metallurgical Engineering (10%), Aeronautical Engineering (10%), Physics (10%), and Economics (10%).The mean of the control group's grades in the intermediate course was 34.3 out of 45. Therefore, in terms of age, proficiency level and prospective departments, the students in the experimental and control groups seemed to carry very similar characteristics.

Both groups received 20 hours of instruction a week. Students at all levels in the Basic English Department have writing lessons and there are separate books to study the different components and aspects of writing. In the tests given during the semester, students are also evaluated in terms of their writing proficiency.

The writing tasks the students are provided with during the course of the semester aim to improve academic writing, which will help them in their departments. To complete these tasks, a process approach is used. There are three main phases of this process. In the pre-writing stage, students are guided in terms of content and language. The second stage is drafting in which the students write the paragraph or the essay. Then the teacher reads and gives feedback. In the last stage, editing, students rewrite their essays or paragraphs with the help of the teacher feedback.

This study was carried out in two upper-intermediate classes. In the upper-intermediate level, four or five hours per week are allocated to writing skill. In writing lessons, the students follow the book *Ready to Write More* (1997) by Blanchard and Root. This book starts with the basics of writing a paragraph, e.g. writing a topic sentence, supporting ideas, ensuring unity and coherence, and so on. It explains all the steps of the writing process and then gives information about the different types of writing such as process writing, problem-solution essay, compare-contrast essay, and so on.

A pre-test was given to the students at the beginning of the study in order to determine whether the two groups were comparable in terms of writing proficiency. After the pre-test, it was seen that the two groups were almost equal in terms of their grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, which were the concern of this study. The pre-test was prepared by the school administration; therefore, it was not analyzed for its reliability by the researchers. All the upper-intermediate classes took the same test as part of a mid-term exam.

The time given for the writing test was 50 minutes. The test included five extracts. These were about the topic of the writing. Four of them were speech extracts of different people and one of them was an advertisement. The students were asked to write a five-paragraph classification

essay using the information given. The information helped them to generate ideas. The essays were evaluated by the instructors of both groups in order to avoid subjectivity and to ensure the reliability of the results.

After the pre-test, both the experimental group and the control group were assigned eight writing tasks, lasting for eight weeks. The two groups received different types of feedback to their writing. The instructor of the control group gave short comments on the content and organization, but he highlighted all the structural mistakes, i.e. mistakes of grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, by underlining the error and indicating the type of mistake using error codes. In the experimental group, on the other hand, the instructor also gave short comments on the content and organization, but she just picked out a few major and most frequent grammar mistakes of the student and wrote summative feedback for them below the essay, explaining why they were not correct, reminding the rule or asking the student to check again.

In the ninth week, a post-test was used to get information about the students' writing proficiency after the treatment finished. The test was again prepared by the school administration, so the researchers did not analyze the reliability of the test. This test was also a part of a mid-term exam.

The duration of the post-test was 75 minutes. The test included six short speech texts of different people. The students were asked to write a five-paragraph argumentative essay using the information provided. The essays were again rated by two instructors. Using the results of this test, the researchers not only were able to determine the extent of the student achievement at the end of the treatment, but also had a chance to see if there was any difference between the experimental and the control groups in terms of achievement.

### 3.1 Scoring Scale

In order to rate students' performances in the writing tests in terms of grammar, vocabulary use

and mechanics, an analytic scale was adapted from Brown and Bailey (1984). The original analytic scoring scale (Brown and Bailey, 1984) has five components for the raters to examine individually. These components are *organization*, *content*, *grammar*, *punctuation/ spelling/ mechanics*, and *style and quality of expression*. The raters evaluated only three of these components in the essays: *grammar*, *style and quality of expression*, and *punctuation/ spelling/ mechanics*. The raters considered these aspects separately and then decided on the appropriate grade category for each aspect. These categories were determined according to the quality and accuracy of the essays. The grades varied from 0 to 20 including all five components. These grade categories were *excellent to good* (20-18), *good to adequate* (17-15), *adequate to fair* (14-12), *unacceptable* (11-6), and *not college-level work* (5-1). After the raters settled on a category, they gave a grade for that piece of writing.

The two raters were given the scoring scale and they both followed this reference while assessing the students' essays to achieve reliability. This scoring scale guided the raters in assessing the students' performance. After the writing tests were administered, the first rater, who was not the class instructor, gave a score to each essay according to the scoring scale. Independently, the second rater, who was the class instructor, read the essays and assigned grades to each of them using the scale.

The inter-rater reliability analyses were made by making use of the Pearson correlation. The results were significant at 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient for the first test was .83, which was an average value and indicated a positive correlation between the scores assigned by the two raters. The correlation coefficient for the second test was .843, which was a little higher than the first one and again indicated a positive correlation between the scores of the two scorers.

### 3.2 The Process

The students in both groups were given eight writing tasks during the eight weeks and both

groups followed the same instruction. A process approach was adopted by the two instructors in each writing task. The process approach makes use of three main stages, which were also followed in this study: pre-writing, drafting, and editing. In the pre-writing stage, the students were guided in terms of both content and language to use in the writing. After that, they wrote a draft at home and submitted it to the teacher. The teacher read the essays and gave feedback to each essay. In the classroom, when she distributed the essays, she spent the first five to ten minutes answering the students' questions related to the feedback they had been given. When the students did not understand something in the feedback, they asked the teacher. The students usually asked questions when they understood the feedback but did not know how to correct the mistake, e.g. how to change a misused word. This oral feedback was a part of the instruction. In this stage, the students had a chance to see and correct their mistakes. After correcting their mistakes, they gave a final draft to the teacher to show their comprehension of the mistakes.

In both groups, each week a different topic for writing was assigned to the students. During a week, a general procedure for the writing practiced by both teachers was as follows: The teacher first introduced the type of the essay they would study. Then, the teacher and the students brainstormed ideas about a topic, and students individually, with the help of their peers and the teacher, made an outline in the classroom. Next, the students were asked to write the essay at home as homework and submit it in two days' time. On the last day of the week, the teacher distributed the essays back with the feedback given. The students rewrote the essay using the feedback the teacher had given and submitted the final draft at the beginning of the following week. If a student still made mistakes in the final draft, the teacher used two techniques. First, if there were not too many mistakes and if it was clear that the student tried but could not correct, the teacher provided direct

correction, that is, s/he corrected the mistakes. However, if the student did not try to correct the mistake or had too many mistakes, the teacher asked for a third draft.

This above mentioned process was the same for both groups. They wrote an essay each week, got feedback, and rewrote it using the feedback. The feedback given for content and organization was also the same in both groups. The instructors wrote short comments at the end of the essay appreciating the good parts and pointing out the sources of problems. While the instruction and the content feedback was the same in the two groups, the students in the two groups received different types of feedback on their structural errors (grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics). One of these consisted of using error codes to indicate all the structural errors. The other included brief comments on some selected structural errors. For eight weeks, while the students in the experimental group received selective feedback via general comments, students in the control group received total feedback via error codes on their structural errors.

### 3.2.1 Feedback via Comments

The first type of treatment, which was applied in the experimental group, was the feedback given as short comments. In each writing task, the instructor of this group provided written feedback to students' essays considering both content and form.

Feedback on content included feedback regarding the variety and organization of ideas, the supporting ideas, relevance, coherence, and unity. The instructor used an indirect selective approach for the content feedback. At the end of each essay, she wrote some comments, in which she indicated the problems, highlighted the good aspects, and guided the student to self-correct. These comments would help the student see his mistakes and improve his writing.

Feedback on form consisted of feedback on *grammar*, *vocabulary* and *mechanics/ spelling/ punctuation*. This can also be considered as

structural feedback as opposed to content feedback. For the structural errors, the instructor again used an indirect selective approach. She selected the most serious errors such as the ones which hindered communication, or the ones which were about the important grammar points practiced in class. She also chose the most frequent errors that the student repeated throughout the text or in each essay. For the selected errors, the instructor wrote short comments which would help the student correct his mistakes indirectly. In these comments, the instructor helped the student remember a rule, gave an example to help him correct himself, explained why it was a mistake and asked to correct it, or asked to check it in reference books or dictionaries.

This treatment does not require the student to correct all his mistakes. He is provided with feedback on the most important types of errors. Since his errors are not directly corrected by the teacher, the student has to work on the text, read critically, identify the mistakes, and correct them.

### 3.2.2 Feedback via Error Codes

The second treatment was the feedback via error codes. This treatment was used in the control group. The instructor of the control group provided written feedback to student writing considering both content and form. The feedback given to content was the same as the one in the experimental group. The instructor wrote short comments at the end of the essay. She wrote feedback for good aspects as well as defective points. She appreciated the good parts and pointed out the sources of problems.

While the content feedback was the same in the two groups, the students in the control group received a different type of feedback on form. The instructor underlined or highlighted all the structural mistakes, i.e. mistakes of grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics on the writing and provided an appropriate error code for each type of mistake to help the students correct themselves.

The feedback on form only consisted of codes, so the instructor did not write a summative feedback about the structural errors below the essay. Thus, the instructor of the control group used an indirect total feedback type. The students were provided with error codes for all their structural errors so that they could correct the mistakes indicated. The error codes consisted of some symbols and abbreviations which represented different kinds of errors or problems in writing. These codes were used to indicate what type of mistakes the students had made and to help and guide them in the process of self-correction.

The students in the control group were presented and given a copy of these error codes before the writing tasks started. The instructor of this group explained what these symbols and abbreviations represented and how they were used at the beginning of the treatment in order to eliminate any problems that may have resulted from students' not comprehending the feedback given through the codes.

Since the two groups were instructed by different teachers, they had daily conferences to eliminate any difference in student writing proficiency that may have resulted from the differences in instruction. In other words, by talking to each other every day, the teachers tried to enhance the possibility of giving the same instruction to both groups.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pre-test was given before the treatment at the beginning of the study. An independent sample t-test was conducted to analyze the results and find out whether the scores of the two groups were significantly different from one another. The mean score of the experimental group was 14.6 ($SD$=2.95) out of 20 and that of the control group was also 14.6 ($SD$=2.76). According to the results of the independent samples t-test, p-value was 1.0, which indicated that the result was not significant and there were no evidence to suggest that the two means were significantly different. Since there

was not a significant difference between the two groups, the researchers were able to compare their scores in the post-tests, which was given after using the two treatments.

For eight weeks, the students received the treatments. They wrote an essay each week, got feedback, and rewrote it using the feedback. At the end of the study, a post-test was used to determine whether the performance of the two groups differed as a result of the two different types of form feedback used with the groups. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the means of the post-test results in the two groups. This helped to answer the research question and to see whether using general comments for selected forms improved students' writing proficiency in terms of accuracy, vocabulary use and mechanics better than the use of error codes. The mean score of the experimental group was 16.5 (*SD*=2.32) out of 20 whereas the mean score of the control group was 15.8 (*SD*=3.04). In order to determine whether there was a significant difference between the post-test scores of the control group and the experimental group, an independent samples t-test was conducted. According to the results of the independent samples t-test, p was 0.571. As p>0.05, the result was not significant and no evidence could be found to suggest that the two means were different. Thus, the different treatments applied in the experimental and control groups have proven no difference in terms of improving students' accurate language use in their writing.

Similar to the findings of Hendrickson (cited in Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982), who found out that selective and total correction did not bring about any significant differences in the students' written proficiency, the different treatments applied in this study have proven no difference in terms of improving students' accurate language use- grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. The results of this study demonstrated that the amount of effort by the teacher was not equal to the student improvement. In this study, there was not

a difference between the scores of the group receiving selective feedback and the group receiving total feedback. Although the instructor of the control group worked more to identify all the errors in the student writing, these students did not achieve better than those whose instructor gave only some feedback on selected aspects.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results of the post-test showed that there was not a significant difference between the two groups – selective feedback group and total feedback group. This signified that the different treatments used in the two groups did not yield any difference in the students' success in the post-test. Indeed, although there was not a statistically significant difference, the mean score of the experimental group was a little higher than that of the control group and its standard deviation was smaller. Therefore, it can be concluded that whether the teacher spends a lot of time highlighting all the errors in the essay or spends less time to comment on some serious errors, the result does not change, and actually, if he gives selective feedback, he may get a better result. Therefore, teachers should prioritize the most frequent and serious grammar problems of students and use selective error feedback. In this way, the teachers will not spend a lot of time dealing with each problem in all student essays. Teachers can spend some of their valuable time giving selective feedback and they can prepare useful lessons for their students in the remaining time.

## REFERENCES

Al-Mekhlafi, A. M. (1997). Corrective feedback in EFL written work. *The Journal of English Language Teaching*, *32*(3), 53-65.

Ancker, W. (2000). Errors and corrective feedback: Updated theory and classroom practice. *English Teaching Forum*, *38*(4), 20-26.

Ashwell, T. (2000). Patterns of teacher response to student writing in a multi-draft composition classroom: Is content feedback followed by form feedback the best method? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *9*(3), 227-257.

Bright, J. A. & McGregor, G. P. (1983). *Teaching English as a second language*. Essex: Longman.

Brown, J. & Bailey, K.M. (1984). A categorical instrument for scoring second language writing skills. *Language Learning, 34*(4), 21-42.

Celce-Murcia. M. (1985). Making informed decisions about the role of grammar in language teaching. *TESOL Newsletter, 19*(1), 4-5.

Dulay, H., Burt, M. & Krashen, S. (1982). *Language two.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Enginarlar, H. (1993). Student response to teacher feedback in EFL writing. *System*, *21*(2), 193-204.

Ferris, D. (1999). The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes: A response to Truscott (1996). *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *8*(1), 1-11.

Ferris, D. & Roberts, B. (2001). Error feedback in L2 writing classes, How explicit does it need to be? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *10*, 161-184.

Mahili, I. (1994). Responding to student writing. *English Teaching Forum*, *32*(4), 24-27.

Muncie, J. (2000). Using written teacher feedback in EFL composition classes. *ELT Journal*, *54*(1), 47-53.

Myers, S. (1997). Teaching writing as a process and teaching sentence-level syntax: Reformulation as ESL composition feedback. <http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/tesl-ej/ej08/a2.html> (2002, November 13).