L2 writing teachers’ perspectives, practices and problems regarding error feedback

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Abstract

While research on error correction has focused a great deal on whether teachers should correct errors in student writing and how they should go about it, teacher beliefs and perceptions regarding error feedback have received relatively little attention. This study investigated L2 writing teachers’ perspectives, practices and problems regarding error feedback. A questionnaire was administered to 206 secondary English teachers in Hong Kong and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 19 of them. The questionnaire consisted of both open and close-ended questions, asking teachers about how they correct student errors in writing, how they perceive their work in error correction, as well as their concerns and problems. The follow-up interviews, which were semi-structured, provided in-depth information about salient aspects of the questionnaire findings. The results of the study show that although selective marking is recommended both in the local English syllabus and error correction literature, the majority of teachers mark errors comprehensively. Teachers tend to treat error feedback as a job with little long-term significance. Although they are spending a massive amount of time marking student writing, teachers themselves are not totally convinced that their effort pays off in terms of student improvement. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications that arise from the study.

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1. Introduction

Although a lot has been written on the subject of error correction in writing, research about its effectiveness is still inconclusive. There are studies that point to the usefulness of error feedback (see Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Lalande, 1982; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998); however, there is also research that casts doubt on its benefits (see Cohen, 1987; Truscott, 1996, 1999). In recent years, Truscott (1996, 1999) has argued, rather radically, that error correction is harmful and should be abandoned in the writing classroom. While Truscott’s idea of correction-free instruction may be welcoming news for writing teachers, in reality it is difficult for teachers to renounce the established practice of giving feedback on student errors in writing. This is especially so in the L2 writing classroom, where students attach a great deal of importance to writing accuracy and are eager to obtain feedback on their errors (Cohen, 1987; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997; Leki, 1991).

The literature on error correction has highlighted several issues that are particularly pertinent to teachers while they are correcting errors. Teachers have to decide whether (1) to correct or not correct errors; (2) to identify or not identify error types; (3) to locate errors directly or indirectly. First of all, should teachers correct errors for students — i.e. should teachers give direct error feedback? There is research evidence to indicate that indirect feedback (i.e., indicating errors without correcting them) brings more benefits to students’ long-term writing development than direct feedback (see Ferris, 2003; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982). Ferris (2002) suggests that indirect feedback is generally more appropriate and effective than direct feedback. The danger of direct feedback is that teachers may misinterpret students’ meaning and put words into their mouths. Direct feedback is appropriate (see Ferris, 2002), however, (1) for beginner students; (2) when errors are ‘untreatable’, i.e., errors not amenable to self-correction such as sentence structure and word choice and (3) when teachers want to draw students’ attention to other error patterns which require student correction.

Should teachers identify error types for students? A prevalent error correction technique is for teachers to underline or circle errors and use error codes to indicate the error types (see Curriculum Development Council, 1999; Ferris, 2002). This is referred to as indirect, coded feedback (as opposed to indirect, uncoded feedback where errors are underlined or circled only). In general, error identification may be worthwhile and meaningful, as it is a useful starting point for discussing errors with students (Raimes, 1991). Error identification, however, can be “cumbersome for the teacher and confusing for the student” (Ferris, 2002, p. 67). Lee (1997) has cautioned that teachers may in fact be over-estimating students’ ability to interpret marking codes, and that teachers may be “using a wider range of metalinguistic terms than students could understand” (Lee, 1997, p. 471). The usefulness of marking codes (or symbols) has been further questioned by Ferris and Helt (2000) and Ferris and Roberts (2001), who found that student performance in error correction
based on errors located by teachers was not significantly different when students were provided with codes (or symbols).

Should teachers indicate error location directly (e.g., by circling or underlining errors) or indirectly (e.g., by indicating in the margin that there is an error on a certain line)? Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) have found that student performance in error correction was not affected by the salience of error feedback, including whether error location was made explicit for students. Lee’s (1997) study, however, has shown that direct prompting of error location was more helpful than indirect prompting, since students were able to correct more errors when errors were directly located for them. It must be noted that in Lee’s study, the students read a text not written by themselves, and the results might have been different had they edited their own text.

Regardless of the error feedback techniques that teachers use, another issue teachers are faced with is whether to mark all student errors. Research on error correction has repeatedly pointed out the disadvantages of comprehensive error feedback, i.e., marking all student errors. Two decades ago, Zamel (1982, 1985) had already pointed out that excessive attention to student errors had turned writing teachers into grammar teachers, deflecting them from other more important concerns in writing instruction. Second language research has indicated that “it is unrealistic to expect that L2 writers’ production will be error free” (Ferris, 2002, p. 5). Comprehensive error feedback, however, is based on the premise that error-free writing is a desirable goal. When teachers adopt comprehensive marking, there is a tendency to over-mark student errors. Teachers may end up spending time and effort improving students’ writing style, apart from marking grammatical errors. Also, comprehensive error feedback is exhausting for teachers (Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 2002; Mantello, 1997) and frustrating for students (Reid, 1998). Selective error feedback is a much more viable option.

Apart from error feedback strategies, the literature on error correction has underlined the importance of error treatment beyond teacher error correction (see Ferris, 2002). In other words, it is important for teachers to use error feedback in conjunction with other strategies to help students treat their own errors. Lee (1997) believes that student conferences can be used to enhance the effectiveness of coded feedback. Error logs, on the other hand, can help students become more aware of their pervasive error patterns, and are therefore useful ways to help students monitor and assess their own progress (see Ferris, 2002). Other strategies teachers can use include editing strategy training, and peer and self-editing workshops. The ultimate goal is to help students locate and correct errors and edit their own writing independently.

In order to come up with a sound pedagogy of error feedback in the writing classroom, it is important to understand the issues teachers face while giving error feedback, their beliefs and their concerns. It is hoped that through obtaining such information, effective measures to cope with such a painstaking task can be designed. With this objective in mind, the present study was conducted to find
out teachers’ existing practice, their beliefs and their problems regarding error feedback. The research questions that guided this investigation are:

1. How do teachers give error feedback in the writing classroom?
2. What are teachers’ views and beliefs regarding error feedback in the writing classroom?
3. What are teachers’ problems and concerns regarding error feedback in the writing classroom?

2. The study

To answer the research questions, a questionnaire for teachers was designed and piloted with a small group of secondary English teachers through personal contact. The questionnaire was then revised and finalized. The questionnaire, which contains two open questions and thirteen closed questions, mainly asks about (1) teachers’ existing error feedback practice, (2) their perspectives on error feedback and (3) their perceived problems (see Appendix A).

Altogether, 206 teachers completed the questionnaires. One hundred and thirty-nine of these questionnaires were distributed to and completed by teacher participants in English language education courses held in a number of Hong Kong universities, and 67 questionnaires were completed by secondary teachers who responded to the questionnaires sent to them through a contact teacher in their school. Of these 206 English teachers, 34% of them (70) had less than 5 years’ teaching experience, 27% (56) had 5–10 years’ teaching experience and 39% (80) had over 10 years’ teaching experience. Ten percent of them (21) were the English panel chairs of their school. Fifty-five percent of them (113) have a degree in English, and 37% (76) have professional qualification in the teaching of English. Overall, it is a heterogeneous group of teachers.

To obtain more in-depth data about teachers’ perspectives, practice and perceived problems regarding error feedback, at the end of the questionnaire survey follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with some teachers (19) based on their own volition. The interviews covered four main areas: (1) detailed versus selective marking errors; (2) use of marking codes; (3) teachers versus students’ responsibility in error location and correction and (4) teacher concerns regarding error feedback. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cantonese (i.e., the teachers’ first language), recorded, transcribed and translated.

3. Results and discussion

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. Statistical tests were carried out to find out whether (1) the teacher’s major (English vs. non-English); (2) the teachers’ teaching experience (below 5 years, 5–10 years and over 10
years) and (3) the forms (levels) the teachers were teaching, would have a significant difference in the answers they gave. Since the statistical data revealed no significant difference, only descriptive data are reported. When open responses are involved, they are summarized and categorized. In the following, the results of the study are presented and discussed according to the statements/questions in the questionnaire survey, supplemented by relevant data obtained from the follow-up interviews. Where appropriate, the questionnaire results are reported according to the specific grade levels the teachers were teaching: namely (1) Forms 1–3, i.e., grades 7–9; (2) Forms 4–5, i.e., grades 10–11 and (3) Forms 6–7, i.e., grades 12–13. The interview data, when cited verbatim, are presented in italics.

3.1. Main purpose of error feedback (Q1)

Teachers were asked about the main purpose of providing feedback on student errors in writing. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of times a certain comment was mentioned by teachers.

- To increase student awareness of errors (65)
- To help students avoid the same errors/learn from the errors (45)
- To help students improve their writing (30)
- To help students correct errors (15)
- To give students encouragement (9)
- To learn how to express ideas/write better (7)
- To learn grammar/cohesion/coherence (5)
- To help students reflect on their writing (4)
- To help students locate their errors (2)
- Long-term benefits — e.g., promoting self-learning (2)

It can be seen that the teachers’ predominant concern is to help students become aware of their errors and to fix them. The findings suggest that on the whole, teachers are more concerned with the immediate goal of helping students avoid the same errors than with the more long-term goal of equipping students with strategies to edit and proofread their writing independently. In this connection, only a very small number of teachers have indicated that the main purpose of error feedback is to help students locate errors, reflect and promote self-learning.

3.2. Teacher’s existing error feedback practice: comprehensive versus selective marking (Q2)

The results show that the majority of teachers performed comprehensive marking. Seventy-six percent of the F1–3 teachers, 77% of the F4–5 teachers and 64% of the F6–7 teachers marked all student errors. Interestingly, in the English syllabus for secondary teachers of Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council,
1999, p. 95), the Education Department\(^1\) states that “teachers need not correct all the mistakes in learners’ work”. It further recommends teachers “correct mistakes selectively” (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p. 95). The reasons why teachers engage in comprehensive marking are explored in the follow-up interviews.

Of the 19 teachers interviewed, 12 were practising comprehensive marking, but they said they would prefer selective marking. Ten out of 12 teachers practised comprehensive marking, either because it was required by the school/panel or because it was a common practice on the English panel. The reasons for comprehensive marking, to sum up, relate to the following:

- Teachers want to look at the overall performance of students
- The errors made by junior form students are basic and have to be pointed out
- When the compositions are not too long (e.g., for junior forms), comprehensive marking is manageable
- Students prefer comprehensive marking to selective marking
- Teachers are considered lazy if they do not mark all student errors
- Students have to rely on teachers to tell them what errors they have made
- If teachers don’t mark all errors, students do not know what kinds of errors they have made
- It is the teachers’ duty to mark all student errors
- Parents want teachers to mark all errors

The above interview data throw light on the reasons why teachers mark errors comprehensively, though some may think selective marking is a better idea. Teachers probably see error correction as their responsibility and feel that it is hard to avoid this job, especially when students request it and when they are unable to correct errors. Also, when students make errors in writing, teachers may find it hard to resist the ‘temptation’ of pointing them out for students.

On the other hand, the reasons why some teachers practise or favour selective marking are as follows:

- Can save time
- Students can focus on specific areas
- Compositions are long
- Heavy workload
- Even if teachers mark all errors, students will still make the same errors next time/students are not learning from their errors
- Students cannot remember what teachers have marked
- Marking all errors cannot really help students improve grammatical accuracy

\(^1\) Presently the Education Department is subsumed under the Education and Manpower Bureau.
• Teachers are not marking machines. They should spend more time on teaching and lesson preparation
• Students are not happy when they get back their compositions full of red marks
• Not all students can handle comprehensive marking — e.g., for those students who have a large number of errors in writing, comprehensive marking is overwhelming and demotivating

The inefficacy of comprehensive marking is rightly pointed out by one teacher: *It's not necessary to do comprehensive marking. Even if I mark all the errors, they still make the same types of mistakes next time.*

Selective marking, however, is not without problems. Some teachers have pointed out that selective marking is not very useful, especially for those students who have not made the mistakes that teachers have chosen to mark. Some think that selective marking is hard to implement because teachers simply do not know how to go about it. These may explain why some teachers still adopt comprehensive marking though they may find selective marking a better idea. Indeed, it is important to enlist the school’s support if teachers are to do selective marking. In the restrictive educational environment of Hong Kong, English teachers have to work collaboratively and discuss how best to implement selective marking in different form levels — e.g., they even have to agree what error patterns they will focus on, and how to link these decisions with in-class grammar instruction.

3.3. Selective marking: percentage of errors marked (Q3)

For those teachers who indicated they carried out selective marking, the percentage of errors selected for marking was rather high. Eighty-six percent of F1–3 teachers, 93% of F4–5 teachers and 84% of F6–7 teachers marked 2/3 or above of student errors. It could, therefore, be concluded that even for selective marking, teachers might not be selective enough in giving error feedback. It is likely that teachers may be influenced by the idea that it is their job to treat as many errors as possible.

3.4. Major principle for selective marking (Q4)

When asked about the major principle for error selection for those who indicated that they performed selective marking, quite a large number of teachers — 40% of F1–3, 33% of F4–5 and 31% of F6–7 teachers — chose the errors selected on any one occasion on an ad hoc basis. Forty percent of F1–3 teachers said they selected errors directly linked to grammar instruction, but only 24% of F4–5 and 13% of F6–7 teachers said their practice was directly linked to grammar instruction. Such a difference could be explained by the fact that lower form teachers may adopt direct grammar instruction more frequently than upper form teachers. A relatively low percentage of teachers — 13% of F1–3, 29% of F4–5 and 25% of
F6–7 teachers — indicated that the major principle for error selection was related to students’ specific needs. However, the Education Department recommends in the English syllabus that teachers should select errors for marking based on student needs: “Instead of correcting all the mistakes in a piece of writing, the teacher should first agree with learners what to focus on, e.g., the teacher may concentrate on areas such as tenses or articles, because these are where the learners particularly need help” (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, pp. 95–96). From the questionnaire findings, teachers in general do not seem to be practising what the Education Department recommends.

3.5. Selective marking: Are students aware? (Q5)

The majority of teachers indicated that their students were aware of the error types they selected to provide feedback on — 67% of F1–3 teachers, 80% of F4–5 teachers and 83% of F6–7 teachers. It is likely that student awareness of error types is realized through the teachers’ use of marking codes, since the majority of teachers used marking codes in correcting errors, as revealed in the questionnaire questions 5 and 6.

3.6. Marking codes (Q6 & Q7)

The large majority (87%) of teachers used a marking code in marking student writing. Eighty percent of the teachers said that they were required by the school to use a marking code. This practice is in line with the Education Department’s recommendation (see Curriculum Development Council, 1999). For almost half of the teachers (49% of F1–3, 44% of F4–5 and 41% of F6–7 teachers), the marking code was designed by another teacher. Some teachers (38% of F1–3, 41% of F4–5 and 36% of F6–7) adapted the marking code designed by another teacher, and very few teachers (7% of F1–3, 8% of F4–5 and 14% of F6–7 teachers) designed their own marking code. It is doubtful, however, if teachers could cater to the needs of their students if the marking codes were not designed by themselves.

In the follow-up interviews, some interesting comments were raised about the use of marking codes. While the questionnaire findings show that generally a lot of teachers like marking codes, some problems were mentioned in the follow-up interviews — e.g.,

- Sometimes the marking codes can’t be applied to syntax level errors
- Sometimes it’s difficult to categorize the errors according to the marking code
- When students don’t understand the codes, they come to ask me individually. I’d rather correct the errors for them because I don’t want all of them to come out and ask for the corrections
- Junior form students haven’t learnt all the grammar aspects covered in the marking code, so they don’t know what to do
- Weaker students don’t know how to use the marking code
• Even though students understand the marking code, they don’t know how to correct the errors
• It doesn’t help if students are not motivated

The interview data further suggest that some teachers are aware of the fact that marking codes can be problematic for both teachers and students — e.g., it is time-consuming for teachers and could be frustrating for students, especially when a large number of codes are involved.

During the interviews, some teachers made some constructive suggestions about the use of marking codes, e.g.,

• Limit the error types
• Provide students with a set of guidelines
• Give examples to illustrate how the marking code works
• Adapt the marking code according to student needs
• Hold a conference with students and go through the errors with students
• Simplify the marking code to make it manageable for students

However, if we are to convince teachers and principals of the need to re-evaluate and perhaps to change existing error feedback practice with regard to the use of marking codes, much more research is warranted — e.g., to throw light on how best a marking code can be designed, the optimal number of error types, and so on.

3.7. Error feedback techniques (Q8–Q10)

In the questionnaire, teachers were asked how frequently they used the six different error feedback techniques described in the questionnaire (see Q8 in the Appendix A). The findings show that for almost half of the F1–3 teachers (46%), the most common error feedback technique always/often used is ‘indicating and correcting errors’ (i.e., direct feedback), followed by ‘indicating errors, categorizing but not correcting them’ (i.e., indirect coded feedback — 36% of the teachers). For F4–7 teachers, the reverse is the case. The most common technique always/often used is ‘indicating, categorizing but not correcting errors’ (i.e., indirect coded feedback — 43% and 49% of F4–5 and F6–7 teachers, respectively), followed by ‘indicating and correcting errors’ (i.e., direct feedback — 25% and 36% of F4–5 and F6–7 teachers, respectively). The findings suggest that F1–3 teachers tend to favour direct feedback, while F4–7 teachers tend to favour indirect coded feedback, namely indicating and categorizing errors for students. On the other hand, the error feedback techniques that teachers said they never or rarely used turned out to be ‘hinting at the location of errors’ and ‘hinting at the location of errors and categorizing them’ (both are indirect feedback involving indirect error location). For the former, 81%, 71% and 62% of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers never/rarely used the technique. For the latter, 67%, 54% and 55% of the F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers said they never/rarely used the technique. These two techniques are more
demanding for students, since the teachers indicate error location indirectly and students have to locate errors themselves. In the main, the results show that the large majority of teachers tend to locate errors directly for students rather than prompt them with error location. While direct feedback may be more appropriate for lower-level students, teachers on the whole have to experiment with a wider range of error feedback techniques, especially those that help students locate their own errors.

When asked if the school prescribed the error feedback techniques they indicated they used, answers of 58% of the teachers were negative. The finding suggests that slightly over half the teachers chose the error feedback techniques on their own accord. Nevertheless, 42% of teachers said that their school required them to mark student writing in specific ways, which could imply that they had less flexibility in trying out different error feedback techniques. Indeed, some teachers might have to mark student writing in certain ways simply because it was a policy their school or panel foisted on them.

When teachers were asked about the factors that affected the error feedback technique(s) they always/often used, 68% of them said that the determining factor was ‘student request’, 52% of them said it was ‘the amount of time available’ and 93% of the teachers said that it was their perception of students’ needs. It is not difficult to understand why student request is one important factor — e.g., research has demonstrated that students like to have direct feedback (see, e.g., Robb et al., 1986). The amount of time available is seen as another important factor that affects the choice of error feedback techniques. This is also understandable given that error correction is such a time-consuming task (also see results for Q12 in the following). As for ‘student needs’, it would be interesting to find out how teachers perceive student needs. The results of Q14 in the following on teacher beliefs would help clarify this.

3.8. What teachers did after marking students’ writing (Q11)

Most of the teachers said they would make students correct errors in/outside class (68%, 65% and 60% of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers) and go through students’ common errors in class (78%, 79% and 72% of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers). Far fewer teachers used other methods, such as conferencing with students (20%, 29% and 33% of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers) and making students record errors in error logs (5%, 4% and 9% of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers). The results suggest that teachers’ role beyond error correction is mainly limited to going through common errors in class at the post-feedback stage.

3.9. Time spent on marking (Q12)

When asked about the amount of time they spent marking one composition, 56% of F1–3 teachers spent less than 10 minutes and 39% spent 10–20 minutes. As for F4–5 teachers, 72% of F4–5 teachers spent 10–20 minutes and 19% spent more
than 20 minutes. The amount of time, quite naturally, goes up as teachers mark
student writing of higher forms. Sixty-one percent of teachers said they spent more
than 20 minutes marking one F6–7 composition and 31% spent 10–20 minutes.
Apparently, English teachers are spending a large amount of their time on marking.
No wonder English teachers find error correction such an exhausting job.

3.10. Overall effectiveness of existing error feedback practice (Q13)

When teachers were asked to evaluate the overall effectiveness of their error
feedback practice in terms of students’ progress in grammatical accuracy in writing
at the end of one academic year, the majority of teachers (55%, 62% and 65%
of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers, respectively) indicated that their students made
‘some’ progress. It is unfortunate that despite the amount of time spent on marking,
only a small number of teachers (8%, 6% and 12% of F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7
teachers, respectively) thought that their students were making ‘good’ progress.
When teachers are spending an inordinate amount of time on error feedback and
yet feel that students are not making good progress, one could not help but ask:
Does the existing error feedback policy pay off?

3.11. Teachers’ beliefs regarding error feedback (Q14)

Teachers were provided with 10 statements to indicate on a likert-scale to what
extent they agreed or disagreed. The results (see Table 1), reveal several discrep-
ancies regarding teacher beliefs and practice.

Although 91% of teachers think that teachers should provide feedback on errors
selectively, in reality, only a minority are practising it (24%, 25% and 37% of
F1–3, F4–5 and F6–7 teachers, respectively). The interview data have already
indicated that teachers are under pressure to mark errors comprehensively, or that
they are uncertain about how selective marking can be carried out. When asked
whether it is the teacher’s job to locate errors and provide corrections for students,
60% of the teachers express their agreement. This is a rather high percentage and
could explain why many teachers favour direct feedback. However, when asked
if students should learn to locate and correct errors, 96% of them believe that
students should learn to locate their own errors, and 99% of them believe that
students should also learn to correct their own errors. Teachers, therefore, seem
to contradict themselves. Although they are aware of the importance of asking
students to take on the responsibility of error location and correction, in reality
teachers may be driven by the daily and pressing demands of students, parents,
panel chairs, principals, etc. to shoulder the responsibility of error location and
correction. The idea of empowering students to locate and correct errors may only
reside at the back of the teachers’ minds.

Another statement which shows a gap between teachers’ beliefs and practice is
that 94% of the teachers think that they should vary their error feedback techniques,
but in reality, the techniques they use tend to be mainly restricted to ‘indicating
Table 1
Teachers’ beliefs regarding error feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ beliefs regarding error feedback</th>
<th>Strongly disagree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is no need for teachers to provide feedback on student errors in writing.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should provide feedback on student errors selectively.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is the teacher’s job to locate errors and provide corrections for students.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should vary their error feedback techniques according to the type of error.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding errors with the help of a marking code is a useful means of helping students correct errors for themselves.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking codes should be easy for students to follow and understand.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All student errors deserve equal attention.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students should learn to locate their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students should learn to locate and correct their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students should learn to analyze their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and correcting errors’ and ‘indicating, categorizing and not correcting errors’ (see Q8). Also, although 96% of them think that students should learn how to analyze their own errors, the findings show that teachers are not doing a lot beyond error correction to enable students to analyze their own errors (e.g., few teachers use error logs). It could be possible that teachers are not aware of the range of error feedback techniques, or that they are so much overburdened by their marking load that there is not enough time and space for them to reflect on their error feedback practice and to adjust or improve it. More importantly, teachers may lack both awareness and knowledge about the possibility of using different error feedback techniques, especially given the fact that correcting errors (i.e., direct feedback) and locating and categorizing errors with codes (i.e., indirect coded feedback) have been the ‘norm’ in the Hong Kong writing classroom.

The questionnaire results show that many teachers are self-contradictory when they express their views of the responsibility of error location and correction — whether it is the teachers’ or the students’ job. During the interviews, teachers were asked to elaborate on their answers. Most of the teachers explained that because students are unable to locate and correct errors, teachers have to help them. One teacher said:

Actually if the students can really locate errors, they can learn a lot from it. However, usually it’s the teachers who do the error correction. If teachers do most of the things, students have less work to do, then they can learn more. I tried to ask them to locate errors themselves, but the result was not good. Maybe
they had never tried this before or maybe my instruction was not clear. I didn’t know the exact reason so I didn’t try it again. I also tried to ask them to correct others’ work, but they tended to have many arguments. Then I never tried it again.

Anyway, they couldn’t do it well.

This teacher took an avoidance approach — since putting the onus on students did not work well, the teacher decided to give it up. In reality, this problem may be shared by other teachers. One teacher said: *For the less capable students, they can’t do locate and correct their errors, and we don’t force them.* It is of course true that we cannot and should not force students to do something beyond their ability. This is exactly why selective marking is more appropriate than comprehensive marking. When teachers select certain grammatical items to mark, students are supposed to have learnt about those items. Requiring students to locate errors relating specifically to those areas is entirely reasonable; no coercion is involved.

3.12. Teachers’ problems/concerns regarding error feedback (Q15)

Finally, teachers were asked to express their concerns regarding error feedback in an open-ended question. Teachers’ problems and concerns are categorized in the following. Verbatim quotes are shown in italics. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of times a certain comment is raised.

- Time-consuming (17)
- About marking codes (15) — weaker students are unable to use marking codes; time-consuming for teachers; some errors cannot be categorized according to marking codes; students are unable to correct errors based on codes provided; too many codes would confuse students
- Repetition of student errors (13)
  
  *It seems that students make the same errors again even though clear explanation of their errors has already been given in class or individually.*

- Students’ weak proficiency (13)
  
  *It is inefficient to let students correct their own errors, as most of them are incapable of doing so.*

  *Though the teacher has explained so many times, they still can’t get it as their grammar skills are really weak.*

- Ineffectiveness of existing error feedback practice (8)

  *The effectiveness of marking writing errors seems not satisfactory enough. I hope to find a better method to improve students’ awareness of grammatical structures.*

- Doubt about comprehensive marking (7)

  *If a piece of writing contains too many mistakes, it will not be useful to provide thorough correction. . . . I agree that we should provide feedback to students selectively. Not all errors are important but the school expects us to mark all errors. So it’s difficult to practice selective marking of error. That’s a dilemma I am facing that prevents me from helping students effectively.*
• Importance of learner responsibility (7)
   We need to promote a stronger sense of ownership on the part of students, i.e. to let them be responsible for locating their errors, rather than becoming passive learners, doing corrections based on teachers’ marking code. They should learn to locate some of the major errors in their work. Therefore, there is a need to train students proofreading.

• Student attitude (4) — they don’t work hard to improve; they don’t care about their errors

• Concerns about selective marking (3)
   Although I agree that selective marking of error is more efficient, it seems impossible for me to do. When I see students making similar errors, I feel it’s my duty to remind them.
   If errors are not marked, students will think that they are not ‘errors’ and will probably make them again.
   Sometimes teachers want to do focus marking but the panel practice is not what teachers prefer.

• Conferences with students (2)
   If teachers have more contact time with students, it’s much more effective to discuss/go over the errors with students in a face-to-face situation.

The above open-ended answers are particularly useful in the light of the quantitative answers obtained from the other questionnaire items. Teachers’ concerns with time and their heavy workload are very understandable, and are supported by the concrete data regarding the amount of time teachers usually spend on marking. Although the majority of teachers use marking codes, the findings from this question reveal that quite a number of the teachers express doubt about their usefulness. Related to this is that many teachers are hoping to find ways to improve their error feedback practice so as to enhance its efficacy, especially given the weak English standards of their students. Some of them have reservations about comprehensive marking. On the other hand, the responses also indicate the problems associated with selective marking — e.g., the school’s preference for comprehensive marking as well as student perception. Some teachers also doubt how seriously students take teachers’ error feedback, and how much effort they make to learn from their errors. All the ideas raised by the teachers in this question are interesting and useful, intricately related to one another. For example, the fact that some students are not treating error feedback seriously may make teachers doubt the effectiveness of their existing practice. On the other hand, although some teachers do not prefer comprehensive marking, which takes up a large proportion of their time, they find it hard to practise selective marking for reasons like resistance of the school and lack of training and experience in selective marking. The problems and concerns raised by teachers show that error feedback is, in a real sense, a most tricky and taxing area of English teachers’ work.

Apart from ‘time’ and ‘workload’ and other concerns expressed in the questionnaire survey, the interview data reinforce teachers’ desire to find a more effective
way to treat errors. For instance, one teacher said: *We are used to detailed marking, but we know it’s not effective. I think we have to find out an effective marking method.* Some teachers probably feel that error feedback is such a huge and difficult area that they are at a loss. One teacher said: *I think I need some help, but I’m not sure what kind of help I need. I think I need more time.*

Overall, the questionnaire survey and the interviews have provided useful information about teachers’ perspectives, practices and concerns regarding error correction. Although no definite conclusion can be drawn from the diverse data, it is clear that teachers are not completely satisfied with their own practice, and they need help and guidance in order to tackle this challenging and significant aspect of their work.

4. Limitations of the study

Before discussing the implications of the study, it is important to outline the limitations of the study. First, the questionnaire survey involved only 206 secondary teachers of English, which is not a representative sample of the whole secondary English teacher population in Hong Kong. Therefore, the results can by no means be generalized. Second, the results of the study mainly provide information about what teachers think they do in the classroom with regard to error correction, i.e., their self-reports. It is not certain how teachers in reality go about error correction. Third, as far as teacher beliefs and perceived problems regarding error feedback are concerned, the survey is unable to probe deeply into teacher thinking. Although follow-up telephone interviews were used, it is important to supplement the survey data with other concrete data, such as analysis of teachers’ error corrections in student writing.

5. Implications and conclusions

The findings from the questionnaires as well as the interviews suggest that teachers’ error correction practices are not always consistent with their beliefs or the published research, and that the teachers do not appear to be prepared to help students develop self-editing strategies. The results of the study, thus, clearly point to the need to review and revamp the prevalent error correction practices in Hong Kong schools.

First, teachers have to re-consider whether they should adopt comprehensive or selective marking. As stated by Ferris (2002), error feedback may be most effective “when it focuses on patterns of error, allowing teachers and students to attend to, say, two or three major error types at a time, rather than dozens of disparate errors” (Ferris, 2002, p. 50). The findings of this study have, however, indicated that in Hong Kong a lot of teachers have little idea about how to go about selective marking. If selective marking is to be implemented success-
fully, it is important that error feedback policy be discussed openly among English teachers at the school level, concerns and problems shared, and ways sought to link error feedback systematically with grammar instruction: all of this demands close attention in teacher pre-service or in-service training in the teaching of writing.

Second, despite the popularity of marking codes among teachers, the study has suggested that marking codes may not be as effective as some teachers think. Research is warranted to find out whether and how marking codes may assist error correction and facilitate student writing development.

The study has also shown that the teachers’ feedback strategies are limited. It has made clear that teachers have to be trained to give error feedback and to do so, effectively and efficiently — e.g., to experiment with a wider range of feedback techniques. Teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, have to pay more attention to this aspect of writing instruction assessment, which tends to be considered a mundane aspect of teachers’ work and thus easily goes unnoticed. These findings echo those of Glenwright (2002), also in Hong Kong. However, it seems possible that if research were to be carried out in many other countries where English is an ambiguous EFL–ESL position, similarly unsatisfactory results would be found.

Importantly, teachers need to be made more aware of long-term measures to help students become independent editors. The findings of the study suggest that teachers tend to treat error feedback as a task with little long-term significance. Although teachers are aware of the importance of error feedback in helping students improve the accuracy of their writing in the long run, few are taking action to empower students through error feedback. For instance, very few teachers are using error frequency charts or error logs to help students become more aware of their own error patterns and take greater responsibility for their own improvement. As Ferris and Helt (2000) argue, it is important for error feedback to be used together with grammar instruction and strategy training so that students will learn to edit their own writing independently. Other forms of error feedback should also be explored, e.g., student conferences, peer and self-evaluation.

Last but not least, the study has suggested that some schools may require teachers to mark errors in specific ways, particularly ways that are not necessarily productive — e.g., requiring teachers to mark and/or correct all errors. Instead, teachers should be helped to examine and reflect on their own practice critically, and to do classroom research into alternative ways to go about correcting errors. A more open and reflective attitude to error feedback should be encouraged. If, however, the main stakeholders like school administrators, parents and students continue to insist that teachers mark errors in certain ways, it is unlikely that innovative ideas about error correction will gain ground. More study is thus warranted to find out the views of school administrators, parents and students regarding error correction, and to explore ways of changing unproductive attitudes.
Appendix A. Error feedback on student writing

This questionnaire aims to find out how you mark grammar errors in students’ writing, your beliefs about error feedback, and the concerns you may have regarding the subject. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

Section 1
Please circle the appropriate answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Secondary teaching experience:</th>
<th>Less than 5 years</th>
<th>5 to 10 years</th>
<th>over 10 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Form level(s) currently teaching:</td>
<td>F1–3</td>
<td>F4–5</td>
<td>F4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Are you the English panel chair?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Do you have a degree?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Do you have an English-related degree (e.g. TESL/TEFL, linguistics, translation)?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do you have a Postgraduate Diploma / Certificate in Education (PGDE / PGCE)?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Do you have a PGDE / PGCE in English?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Do you have a higher degree?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Do you have a higher degree in an English-related subject (e.g. TESL/TEFL, linguistics, translation)?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 2
1. In your opinion, what is the main purpose of providing feedback on students’ errors in writing?

2. Which of the statements below best describes your existing error feedback practice? Please tick the most appropriate box for the form level(s) you are teaching.

My existing error feedback practice: F1–3 F4–5 F6–7
A. I don’t mark students’ errors in writing.
B. I mark ALL students’ errors.
C. I mark students’ errors selectively.

If your answer to Question 2 is “A” for all form levels, you do NOT have to answer this questionnaire.
Appendix A. (Continued)

If your answer to Question 2 is “C” for any form level(s), answer Questions 3, 4 and 5. If you have not ticked “C”, go to Question 6.

3. Tick the amount of errors you mark for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of errors selected for marking</th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. About 1/3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. About 2/3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. More than 2/3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Which of the following best describes the major principle for error selection? Please tick the most appropriate box for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major principle for error selection</th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. The selected errors are directly linked to grammar instruction in class – e.g., after I have taught subject-verb agreement, I provide feedback on subject-verb agreement errors.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The selected errors are related to students’ specific needs – e.g., knowing that students are particularly weak in articles, I provide feedback on article errors.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The selected errors are suggested by the English panel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. The errors are selected on an ad hoc basis – i.e., I decide what errors to provide feedback on while I am marking.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Others (Please specify in the relevant box)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Are your students aware of the type(s) of errors you select to provide feedback on? Please circle the appropriate answer for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are students aware of error type(s) selected?</th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Please circle the appropriate answer for the following questions about the use of marking codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Do you use a marking code for providing error feedback on student writing?</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Does your school require you to use a marking code?</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A. (Continued)

If you use a marking code, answer Question 7. If not, go to Question 8.

7. Who designed the marking code? Please tick the most appropriate box for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The marking code I use</th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. was designed by another English teacher (e.g. panel chair or form co-ordinator).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. was designed by another English teacher (e.g. panel chair or form co-ordinator) and adapted by myself.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. was designed by myself.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. was taken from an external source — e.g. books, the Internet, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Others (Please specify in the relevant box)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. Rate the frequency with which you use each of the following error feedback techniques according to the scale below. Please circle the appropriate number for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you use the following error feedback techniques?</th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. I indicate (underline/circle) errors and correct them — e.g. has went.</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. I indicate (underline/circle) errors, correct them and categorize them (with the help of a marking code) — e.g. has went (verb form).</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. I indicate (underline/circle) errors, but I don’t correct them — e.g. has went.</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. I indicate (underline/circle) errors and categorize them (with the help of a marking code), but I don’t correct them — e.g. has went (verb form).</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. I hint at the location of errors — e.g. by putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line.</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. I hint at the location of errors and categorize them (with the help of a marking code) — e.g. by writing ‘Prep’ in the margin to indicate a preposition error on a specific line.</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A. (Continued)

9. Please circle the appropriate answer for the question below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does your school prescribe the error feedback technique(s) you indicate you always or often use in Question 8?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes / No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If your answer to Question 9 is “no”, answer Question 10. If your answer is “yes”, go to Question 11.

10. What factors influence the error feedback technique(s) you always / often use? Please circle the appropriate answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors affecting the error feedback technique(s) you always / often use</th>
<th>Yes or no?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Students’ request – i.e. students ask for it / them</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. My perception of students’ needs</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The amount of time I have</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Others (Please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. What do you usually do after you have marked students’ compositions? Please tick the appropriate box(es) for the form level(s) you are teaching. You can tick more than one box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I usually do after marking students’ writing</th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. I do not do anything</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. I hold a conference with each student / some students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. I make students correct errors in / outside class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. I make students record their errors in an error log / error frequency chart.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. I go through students’ common errors in class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Others (Please specify in the relevant box)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. How much time approximately do you spend marking one composition? Please tick the most appropriate box for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F1–3</th>
<th>F4–5</th>
<th>F6–7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 20 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A. (Continued)

13. How would you evaluate the overall effectiveness of your existing error feedback practice on student progress in grammatical accuracy in writing at the end of one academic year? Please tick the most appropriate box for the form level(s) you are teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms. students are making</th>
<th>F1-3</th>
<th>F4-5</th>
<th>F6-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. good progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. some progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. little progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. no progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements according to the scale below. Please circle the most appropriate box for each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. There is no need for teachers to provide feedback on student errors in writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Teachers should provide feedback on student errors selectively.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. It is the teacher’s job to locate errors and provide corrections for students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Teachers should vary their error feedback techniques according to the type of error.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Coding errors with the help of a marking code is a useful means of helping students correct errors for themselves.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Marking codes should be easy for students to follow and understand.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. All student errors deserve equal attention.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Students should learn to locate their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Students should learn to locate and correct their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Students should learn to analyze their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you have any concerns or problems regarding providing error feedback on student writing, please elaborate.

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up (telephone) interview, please fill in the information below. Thank you.
Mr / Ms / Mrs: _____ (surname)  E-mail: ________  Phone no: ________
End of questionnaire
Thanks!

References


Icy Lee is an assistant professor in the Department of Education Studies at the Hong Kong Baptist University. She has teaching experience at secondary, undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Hong Kong and ESL teaching experience in Canada. Her main research interests include ESL writing, second language teacher education and teacher development.