Pre-University Students' Strategies in Revising ESL Writing Using Teachers' Written Corrective Feedback

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ABSTRACT

English Language writing teachers have always corrected students' writing, hoping that their efforts would help students to write better. Students, on the other hand, may use the teacher's feedback to improve their writing. Teachers' strategies in giving feedback have been researched extensively, as compared to students' strategies in revising their writing. The objectives of this study are to find out the most common strategy used by the students, and further, to determine which strategy is considered as being the most effective. A qualitative approach was used in this study, where data were collected from the analysis of students' opinion-based essays and retrospective interviews. The study revealed that the most common strategy used was *closely follow* because students believed that they needed to make sure the revised essays were error-free. The results also showed that the same strategy was considered as being successful as many of the revised WCF were error-free. The results implied that even though students may successfully revise the essay, they may not necessarily understand the nature of the errors committed. It is recommended that teachers give written corrective feedback with oral feedback and this should be done while students are writing the essay, in line with Flower-Hayes Cognitive Process Theory of Writing.

Keywords: ESL writing, student response revision strategy, teacher feedback, writing as a process, written corrective feedback.

INTRODUCTION

In language learning, making errors is inevitable; indeed, it is a crucial part of learning the target language. According to Dulay and Burt (1974, as cited in Wan Mazlini, 2012), error making is one of the

most important factors of the discovery process of the underlying rules and system of the target language. Wan Mazlini (2012) asserted that actual learning of the target language takes place when the learners make mistakes, and the mistakes are corrected. Making errord is a sign of actual learning as it indicates the students' progress and success in language learning.

Murray (1972) argues that writing should be taught as a process, not a product. In 1981, Flower and Hayes postulated the Cognitive Process Theory of writing, which sees writing as a cognitive process where writers make conscious decisions of what and how they will write. In any writing classroom, feedback given by the writing teacher is an important part of the lesson itself. Feedback could be utilised as a tool to improve students' writing in order to achieve both fluency and accuracy in writing. How best to deliver effective feedback in writing is yet to be discovered, given the inconclusive results of prior studies. Moreover, there is a gap in understanding how students would use the feedback given in their writing process to become better writers. The different feedback given and how it is used by students is not very well investigated (Jonsson, 2012, pg. 64) hence there is a need to look into this matter further.

Corrective feedback, be it verbal or written, is the process of providing clear, comprehensive and consistent corrective feedback on a student's grammatical errors for the purpose of improving the student's ability to write accurately (Ferris, 2011). Providing written corrective feedback (WCF) allows individualised teacher-to-student communication that is rarely possible in the normal writing classroom with its many students (Corpuz, 2011). Corpuz outlined two major roles of corrective feedback, namely 1) corrective feedback as focus-on-form intervention; and 2) corrective feedback to facilitate noticing.

According to Long (1991), students' attention will be drawn explicitly to linguistic features as necessitated by communicative needs. By drawing the students' attention to the errors, students can learn the language features in the correct form. Hence, providing corrective feedback can help students to produce second language (L2) structures that are grammatically accurate and applicable for communicative purposes. In a study done by van Beuningen, de Jong and Kuiken (2008) on 268 secondary learners of Dutch as a foreign language, it was found that different types of feedback seemed beneficial for different linguistic features. The study found that direct WCF helped students in improving their grammatical errors, while indirect WCF seemed to be suitable for lexical errors. They also found that learners who received WCF outperformed the control group over time. The same result was shown in a more recent study done by Amiramini, Ghanbari and Shamsoddini (2015), in which they found superior effects of providing learners with feedback on writing, as compared to the control group where no feedback was given.

Providing WCF helps students to improve their accuracy and fluency in writing. Bitchener (2008) proves that students who received WCF still outperformed students who did not receive WCF, even in a post-test that was held two months after the treatment was completed. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) later replicated the same study with a longer period of post-test, which was 10 months, and still found the same result. These studies have shown that WCF could help the students in their accuracy and fluency of writing, even long after the treatment was done.

Providing corrective feedback could also help students to notice certain grammatical features of the target language. Students are able to pay attention to the existence of new features of the L2 they are learning. They become aware and able to locate the gaps between their L2 usage and the accepted form of the target language. Corrective feedback may also help students discover the limitations of their L2 communication abilities with their given L2 resources. Hence, corrective feedback could function as a noticing facilitator that directs the attention of learners not only towards errors, but also towards new features of the target language.

Lee (2005) explained four methods of written corrective feedback that are divided into two categories, namely Comprehensive vs. Selective and Explicit vs. Implicit. Comprehensive written corrective feedback approach sees the teacher correcting all errors in the students' writing, irrespective of their error category.

Comprehensive written corrective feedback could help students notice not only errors made, but also new features of the target language as postulated in Krashen's Noticing Hypothesis. By noticing, effective language learning could be promoted. Nevertheless, Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006, in Corpuz, 2011) claim that given the limited capacity of students' processing ability, students may be overwhelmed, thus comprehensive written corrective feedback may not be as effective as it should be.

On the other hand, selective written corrective feedback targets specific grammatical errors only, leaving all other errors uncorrected. Ellis (2009) claims that selective written corrective feedback may be more effective compared to comprehensive written corrective feedback as students are able to examine multiple corrections of a single error. Students do not only obtain richer understanding of what is wrong in their writing, but also opportunities to acquire the correct form.

Explicit written corrective feedback is the type of feedback where the L2 teacher directly provides the correct forms or structures to show explicitly the error in the students' writing. In the research done by Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006, in Corpuz, 2011), it was found that explicit written corrective feedback was more effective for treating errors in verb tenses. On the other hand, implicit written corrective feedback is where the teacher simply shows that an error is made by underlining, marginal description, circling or correction

codes. Correction codes involve providing corrections implicitly by using symbols and abbreviations to inform students not only that an error has been made, but also the kind of error made. In a research study, Lee (1997) found that students favour implicit written corrective feedback as compared to explicit written corrective feedback. In an earlier research by Lalande (1982), participants showed reduction of errors in writing when implicit written corrective feedback is used.

Students' strategies in utilising the written corrective feedback provided in revising their essays is yet to be fully understood. Sommers (1980) in a study found that students used four revision strategies in revising their L2 essays, namely, 1) *deletion*, 2) *substitution*, 3) *addition*, and 4) *reordering*. Hyland (1998) then further refined these strategies into three categories, namely 1) *closely followed*, 2) *initial stimulus*, and 3) *avoidance by deletion*. On the same note, students were also found to make revisions that were not related to the written corrective feedback (henceforth WCF) provided by the teacher, hence coined as *not related*. Hyland (1998) in a study of two groups of university students examined the strategies used by student writers in revising their ESL writings. In her document analysis of the students' writings, both drafts and final essays, she found that student writers used four strategies in revising their essays, namely 1) *closely follow*; 2) *initial stimulus*; 3) *avoidance by deletion*; and 4) revision that is *not related* to the feedback given.

Closely follow means that the student writers followed closely the corrections and suggestions made by the teacher, while *initial stimulus* was when the WCF was seen as a trigger point for the student writers to rewrite the essay or parts of it in a number of ways. *Avoidance by deletion* is where the students avoided responding to the WCF provided by deleting the problematic features without substituting anything else in the revised essays. In addition to the three categories, some revisions may appear to be *not related* to the WCF given by the teacher. In her study, Hyland (1998) found that the majority of her participants would *closely follow* the WCF provided (43.2%), while 38.8% of the revisions made were *not related* to the WCF provided. While 16.5% of the WCF was used as initial stimulus, 1.5% avoided responding to the WCF by deleting the problematic features mentioned in the WCF.

A study done by Shamshad and Faizah (2009) on students of UiTM Terengganu, Malaysia found that student writers *closely followed* the WCF given (N=117), while 42 revisions made were not related to the WCF provided, 41 WCF triggered the students to rewrite the essays in a number of ways, and 11 WCF were avoided in their revision. Shamshad and Faizah later concluded that the *closely follow* strategy was the most successful strategy used by the students. When a student closely followed a WCF given, it meant either the student understood the WCF or simply followed the advice without really understanding the problem highlighted (Hyland, 1998).

Hyland (1998) found that students with high *not related* revision tended to try to express their thoughts with less priority on the accuracy; hence, they revised the essay on their own without following the WCF given. This may also be the result of the oral feedback provided, which may not be given in written form. On the other hand, relying extensively on WCF may be the result of the concern over the accuracy of the language while oral feedback may not be used at all, hence limiting the *not related* revision.

METHODOLOGY

This study was set up to find out the revision strategies used by 10 pre-university student writers of the Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gambang Campus in revising their ESL writings using the WCF provided by their teacher. Specifically, this study intended to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: Which revision strategy is commonly used by the students?

RQ2: Which of the strategies is deemed as the most effective in revising their opinion-based essays?

Five boys and five girls participated in this study. Eight were in *Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* (SBP), one girl was in *Maktab Rendah Sains MARA* (MRSM) and another girl was in *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* (SMK). All of them met the minimum requirements for the pre-medical sciences course at the university and obtained either A+, A or A- for their English Language subject in their *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM).

A qualitative research design was applied where the data were collected in two ways. The data was collected through documents analysis i.e. the analysis of the students' writings and interviews were done to collect further data. For the purpose of this study, the opinion-based essays written by the students in the classroom were used for data collection and data analysis. In a normal writing class at the centre, IELTS writing band descriptors are used to grade the students' writings. The same descriptors were used in marking the writings for this study, but no grade was awarded. The essays were marked manually by the teacher researcher before the feedback was coded, categorised and then analysed. Draft essays and the revised essays were then compared to identify individual revision operations. In ensuring the validity of the teacher's marking, another teacher was assigned to check the essays, both draft and revised, marked by the teacher-researcher.

Interviews were also done to collect further data. The first retrospective interviews were done after the completion of the first writing task as to examine the students' strategies in revising the essays. The second interview was done after the revised essay was submitted before the students embarked on Writing Task 2. The final interview was done after the submission of the revised essay of the second writing task. The purpose of the interview was to find out why the students decided to revise the essays as they did. The questions for the semi-structured interview were adapted from two previous studies i.e. Ferris, Liu, Sinha and Senna (2013) and Hyland (1998).

Due to the small scale of the present study, there were limitations. Firstly, as the researcher was the interviewer, the respondents may not have given responses that reflected their actual experience, but triggered by what they perceived was what the researcher wanted to hear. Secondly, the scope of the present study was only on written corrective feedback. Other forms of corrective feedback, such as oral and peer feedback, were beyond the scope of the present study. Thirdly, the other factors that may have influenced students' writing skills and ability, such as prior knowledge and experience, as well as the context in which the writing took place, were not taken into consideration in the present study.

RESULTS

The objective of this study was to determine the revision strategy commonly used by the student writers of IIUM Centre for Foundation Studies, Gambang, in revising their ESL compositions. Table 1 illustrates the strategies used by the participants of this study in revising their essays.

TABLE 1
Commonly-Used Strategy

	Closely Follow	Initial Stimulus	Avoidance by Deletion	Not Related	Not Attempted	TOTAL
TASK 1	112	39	81	3	12	247
TASK 2	139	13	53	1	14	222
TOTAL	251	52	134	4	26	469

Table 1 shows that out of the total 469 WCF provided by the teacher researcher, more than half were revised using the *closely follow* strategy (*n*=251, 53.52%). This could be divided almost equally for both writing tasks, with 112 WCF for Task 1 and 139 WCF for Task 2. This is followed by *avoidance by deletion* (*n*=134, 28.57%), *initial stimulus* (*n*=52, 11.09%) and *not related* with a mere 0.85%. It is very interesting to find that students chose not to attempt the errors made in the draft, even though the errors had been highlighted by the teacher. A number of 26 WCF (5.54%) were not attempted. Appendix 1 provides the excerpt from a participant's essays (S3), both draft and revised essay.

The sample shows that out of the six WCF provided, the student closely followed five and left one not attempted (line 6: *In my opinion*, …). In the interview, a participant answered that he *closely followed* all the WCF because he believed that it would help him to improve the essay. When he was asked about the *not attempted* WCF (Line 6: *In my opinion,…*) he mentioned that he did not know how to fix the problematic phrase, thus had left it as it was. Another participant further explained that the error was put in a bracket, without any note added. Even though he knew that the bracket meant the phrase was not suitable, he could not think of any other suitable phrase for the sentence; hence, rewrote it as it was.

The same problem was explained by another participant (S10); she had simply rewritten, "…*robbery and rapping usually happen*…" without changing the error in the revised essay as she "could not think what is wrong with that word". When probed further if she could understand the marking made by the teacher researcher, she said yes, but could not understand the meaning of the wavy line made under the word 'rapping'.

On the other hand, another participant (S1), who *closely followed* the WCF by 87.5% (n=14, N=16), claimed that he closely followed the WCF simply because he did not want to dwell on the essay longer as he had "many other things to do like preparing for Biology and Chemistry quizzes and Mathematics homework." He further explained that he revised the essay the moment the draft was returned, and usually did it in the classroom during the lesson. Out of the 16 WCF provided, he managed to correct all the errors except one even though he closely followed the WCF provided. In the draft essay, a participant wrote "…*many crimes have happened at*…" and revised to "…*many crimes had happened at*…" in the revised essay, when what should have been written as "…*many crimes happen at*…" When he was asked about this error, the student said that he thought the problem was the tense (Present to Past Tense). Appendix 2 provides excerpts from the student's writings.

Avoidance by deletion is the second most common strategy used by the participants of this study. In Task 1, a participant changed a whole paragraph because he thought that "the original point is weak." Excerpts given in Appendix 3 depict the changes the participant made in the third paragraph of the revised essay.

Appendix 3 shows that the idea had been changed from "curfew preventing social problems" to "curfew gives time with family." This change could be labelled as *initial stimulus* strategy, but when he was asked, the participant mentioned that he personally felt that the point he put in the draft essay was "not good enough" and that he ought to come up with a better idea so that his revised essay was "more interesting and convincing compared to the draft essay."

This study also intended to determine which of the strategies was deemed as being successful. As described earlier, the writing revision was considered as being successful if the revised sentence/phrase/word had no errors.

Table 2 shows that 241 WCF were revised successfully using the *closely follow* (CF) strategy. However, 10 WCF that were revised using *closely follow* strategy were not successful. One hundred and thirty-five WCF were successfully revised using the *avoidance by deletion* (AD) strategy, while 48 WCF were used as the *initial stimulus* (IS) by the students in revising the essay. All of the *not attempted* (NR) strategy were unsuccessful.

From the findings above, it is clear that the *closely follow* was the successful strategy student writers could use in revising their essay. The second successful

strategy was *avoidance by deletion*, while unsuccessful revision stemmed from the fact that the participants did *not attempt* (NA) to rectify the problematic language features in the draft essays.

TABLE 2
Successful and Unsuccessful Revision According to the Strategies

	Successful Strategy					Unsuccessful Strategy				
Strategy	CF	AD	IS	NR	NA	CF	AD	IS	NR	NA
Total	**241**	**135**	**48**	**-**	**-**	**10**	**-**	**1**	**4**	**27**

TABLE 3
Comparison of the Results

	Closely follow (%)	Initial stimulus (%)	Avoidance by deletion (%)	Not related (%)
Hyland (1998)	43.2	16.5	1.5	38.8
Shamsad & Faizah (2009)	55.45	19.43	5.21	19.91
Razali (2014)	53.52	11.09	28.57	0.85

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The result from this study was parallel to earlier studies done by Hyland (1998) and Shamsad and Faizah (2009). Table 3 shows the comparison of this study to the two studies done earlier.

From Table 3, it is obvious that *closely follow* was the most common strategy applied by student writers of the three studies done. In her study, Hyland found that students would *closely follow* the WCF given because they were very concerned with the grammatical accuracy of their essay. This was proven to be the same case for the participants of the present study. In the interview, a participant strongly felt that the revised essay should be error-free, and closely following the WCF would help him to achieve this. On the other hand, students may resort to the *closely follow* strategy in revising their essays as they are less confident of themselves in terms of grammatical competence. Williams (2003) asserted that students may or may not understand the WCF provided, but because of incompetence in grammar, they do not know how to respond to it. A participant of this study closely followed 88% of the WCF in her Task 1 without understanding the real problem that had occurred in her draft essay. This led to reliance on the teacher's feedback. Another participant relied on the WCF received as he believed that it would help him to revise the essays quickly so that he could focus on other subjects. This strategy could help him to successfully revise the essay without deviating from what had been asked for. This is concurrent with Hyland's (1998) findings that students prefer the easier option of relying on teacher's WCF in revising the essay.

Nevertheless, the *avoidance by deletion* strategy is somewhat preferred by the participants of the present study. Garcia

(1999) stated that students resort to the strategy because they are unable to express their original ideas, and believe that their essays are error-free and the quality has improved. In the present study, a participant used this strategy extensively because he believed that his original idea was weak, and that the time given to revise the essay would give him more time to thoroughly think of a better idea to be written in the revised essay. The inability to express his idea was also due to the fact that the draft was assigned within a short time i.e. an hour in the classroom, while the time given to revise the essay was longer i.e. a week. This ample time given provided him some space to really think about the ideas so that he could improve his essay.

Hyland (1998) claimed that students would resort to such a strategy because they have the enthusiasm for self-expression and the desire to communicate a message. Hyland also asserted that students who choose this type of strategy have less priority for grammatical accuracy. Nevertheless, the participants of the present study were not happy with the revised essay as they still made errors regardless of the strategy they had used. A participant, for example, was divided between producing an error-free essay and providing better, solid ideas for the essays. Hence, he felt that maybe it was best for him to *closely follow* the WCF provided.

This present study also found that the strategy that was considered as successful was *closely follow*. This finding is parallel to a study done by Shamshad and Faizah (2009). In the study, 1,166 out of 1,558 WCF provided

were revised successfully using the *closely follow* strategy. Shamshad and Faizah claimed that even though the students had successfully revised the errors in the draft essays, they may not have really understood the WCF. Hyland (1998) claimed that students *closely follow* the feedback given without really understanding the rules of grammar that were needed in revising the essays. Hence, the results of the present study confirmed the findings of other earlier studies.

In light of the latest study done by Shintani and Ellis (2015), it was found that those students with higher language analytical ability would thrive if they revised their writings following the feedback provided by the teacher. This proves that WCF would help students to write better, especially those with higher language ability.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By understanding the strategy students use in revising their essays, writing teachers could be equipped with better tools for teaching. However, while students may have successfully revised the errors highlighted by teachers in the draft essay, they may not know what exactly the problem was. By closely following the WCF provided, students can rectify the problem without knowing the grammatical rules involved. It is more worrisome in cases where students choose not to attempt the WCF. This implies that teaching has not taken place as it should.

As many other research studies have found, giving WCF to students' writings is

beneficial to the students' improvement in ESL writings. However, real-time feedback should always accompany the written feedback. The feedback should always be given after the completion of the writing exercise. This is important as the writing teacher can get to the problem students face in the writing process. Furthermore, as outlined by Flower and Hayes (1981), the writing process involves the conscious mind of the writer in translating the ideas into words. If the students face problem at this stage i.e. translating the ideas into words, the whole writing process could be apprehended. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to give timely feedback to the students' writing. As suggested by Shamshad and Faizah (2009), this could be done through oral feedback. Face-to-face conference could be a very effective way in giving oral feedback. This kind of follow up session could be a good step in making sure that students could fully utilise the WCF they have received. Writing teachers, in this instance, need to explain the codes used and the comments made so that students can understand the WCF better, hence, be able to revise essays more successfully.

In giving effective WCF, think-aloud protocol should be introduced to student writers. Learners could record what they are thinking while they are writing so that the teacher may listen to the problems the students encountered while writing. In the writing process, think-aloud protocol could be utilised when students are planning the essay. In the planning stage, students may face problems in generating ideas, organising their thoughts as well as setting their goal. Other than that, at the translating stage where students translate their thoughts into words, think-aloud protocol could also be used. By recording the think-aloud protocol, teachers can identify the real problem students face, and hence, be able to provide a better solution to the problem.

Furthermore, teachers should give timely feedback on the essays students produce. Real-time feedback can help students improve their subsequent essays as they are able to utilise the feedback before and while writing the subsequent essays. Teachers should also provide oral feedback together with the WCF because some students may have difficulty in understanding the codes used in the WCF. By combining timely feedback with oral feedback in addition to WCF, surely students can make better use of the WCF they receive on their writings, thus enhancing their strategy in revising the essays. Writing teachers should change their teaching strategy so that WCF can be used as a tool for learning by students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Draft Essay	Revised Essay
1 Parents always want the best for their children. They will do anything as long as it is benefits to their children. Some parents believe that curfews keep their teenagers out of trouble. In my opinion, it is strongly agreed that curfews should be imposed to the teenagers because of the two main points below.	Parents always want the best for their children. They will do anything as long as it is beneficial to their children. Some parents believe that curfews keep their teenagers out of trouble. In my opinion, I strongly agree that curfews should be imposed on teenagers because of the two main points below.

Line numbers in Draft Essay: 1, 5, 10. Line numbers in Revised Essay: 1, 5, 10.

Appendix 2

Draft essay	Revised essay
In addition, many crimes have happened at late night.	*This is because, many crimes had happened at late night.*

Appendix 3

Draft essay	Revised essay
1 Next, curfews also prevents teenagers from social problems. Illegal racing, concert and clubbing are events that encouraged teenagers to get involved in drugs. This matter keeps worrying the parents and some of them take decision to set a time for their children not to come home late in the night. Teenagers can spend more time with their family and it makes teenagers to stay away from the social problems as they know that their family need and love them very much.	Next, curfew will give a lot of time for the teenagers to spend with their family. Limiting the time for teenagers to go back home will increase the time spend at home and this may strengthen the relationship between parents and their children. For example, teenagers may have spent their time with their friends during the day as well as with their family in the night. Indeed, curfew should be imposed on teenagers in order to have time with their parents.

Line numbers in Draft essay: 1, 5, 10, 15. Line numbers in Revised essay: 1, 5, 10.