

# Can Feedback Logs and Peer Feedback Improve Students' Grammatical Accuracy?

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## Reference Data:

Hall, J. (2005). Can Feedback Logs and Peer Feedback Improve Students' Grammatical Accuracy? In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper details the author's trial of using feedback logs in combination with peer response activities to enhance students' grammatical accuracy in their writing. The students who participated in this study were 22 aspiring English teachers in an English teaching methodologies class. At the ending of the treatment, students were better self editors of their work as their incidence of error decreased. This paper will also discuss criticisms of error correction and how this method of feedback addressed them.

この研究は、フィードバック・ログとペアー・レスポンスを導入した英語教育法の授業において、学生のライティングにおける文法的誤りの発生に与えた影響についての調査結果をまとめたものである。これらのフィードバック法の導入により、書いた文章の誤りを学生自身が発見できるようになり、最終的に文法的誤りの発生は減少した。考察では、これらのフィードバック法の導入による効果と学生の文法的誤りを訂正する指導法を批判した理論とを対立させて述べる。

In the fall of 2004, feedback logs and peer feedback were introduced into the curriculum of the author's course for aspiring English teachers called English Teaching Methodologies III. The motivation for this was the consistent and high incidence of error in the students' writing assignments in the previous semester. Although students' errors can be a positive indication that they are attempting to write new and challenging language, the high frequency of errors made their reports difficult to read. Jeffery Harmer (2001) lists one of the roles of foreign language teachers as being a resource by answering questions like "What's the difference between X and Y?" or "Why can't I say Z?" (p.61). To be a resource, students need not only a wealth of metalinguistic knowledge but also the ability to use it, demonstrate it, and sometimes explain it. The author worried that some of the students would struggle with this role when they became English teachers and decided to intervene. In this paper, the introduction of feedback logs and peer response into the class component of writing reports will be discussed. As it was not logistically possible to compare different kinds of feedback groups or a feedback group to a non-feedback group, the objective of this paper is to introduce to the teacher a method of grammatical feedback, summarize its results, and discuss its implications on effective treatment of error.

## Definitions of Feedback Logs and Peer Response

A feedback log, as shown in Table 1 below (or see Appendix 2), is a chart that students use to keep track of the grammatical feedback from their teacher on their papers and measure their own progress. A teacher provides feedback by marking students' errors with codes that tell students the error type. Students, in turn, remedy their own errors. The feedback logs used in this study were developed from the error logs introduced in Ferris (2002) and Lalande (1982). The name was changed to feedback to seem less intimidating.

**Table 1. Demonstration of a Feedback Log**

Practice			Reflection on Feedback: I thought it's good way for us to find the right answer. I want to decrease my errors gradually.
No. of Words 130			
	No.	No. Fixed	
V	1	1	
NE	1	1	
ART	0	0	
WC	1	1	
SS	0	0	
SS?	0	0	

Assignment 1			Reflection on Feedback: When I corrected my errors which you pointed out, I found other errors which you didn't point out. I also found different expressions from what I wanted to mean. So I realized it is important to go over writing.
No. of Words: 300			
	No.	No. Fixed	
V	0	0	
NE	1	1	
ART	1	1	
WC	3	2	
SS	1	1	
SS?	0	0	

The feedback codes were divided into 6 categories and based on those in Ferris (*ibid.*). Although the variety of errors students can make are much more numerous, it was recommended by Professor Ferris<sup>1</sup> that error categories should range from 5 – 7. The reason is that a high number of categories will be difficult for both the students and teachers to learn. Table 1 gives a description of each of the following feedback codes. A more detailed description, which was distributed to the students, is shown in Appendix 1. Generally, words marked V, NE, or ART were relatively simple to fix as usually there was only one solution to the problem. Words marked WC were more difficult to remedy because often there were a number of potential fixes. Quite often the source of the problem with sentences or phrases marked SS could not be identified and, thus, this feedback code was the most difficult to address.

**Table 2. Description of the Feedback Codes**

Abbreviation	Title	Description
V	Verb	Marked incidents of incorrect verb tense or verb form as well as incompatible prepositions with verbs.
NE	Noun Ending	Marked incidents of incorrect noun endings including mistakes with apostrophes.
ART	Article	Marked incidents of incorrect articles, unnecessary articles, or missing articles.
WC	Word Choice	Marked incidents of wrong word form, mistakes with prepositions, fixed phrases that should be replaced, and unidiomatic uses of language.
SS	Sentence Structure	Marked incidents of sentences or phrases that need more words or less words, or should be rewritten. Also marked phrases that should be moved to a different position in the sentence, or should be combined with another sentence.
SS?	Origin Unknown	Marked incidents of sentences or phrases that as a result of multiple factors could not be understood and should be rewritten. They either had numerous grammatical problems or their content was not related to the theme of the report.

Peer response as defined in this study is a pair of students working together to address the largely metalinguistic feedback given by their instructor on their respective first drafts to make their second drafts a better piece of writing. According to Liu and Hansen (2002), effective peer response activities are problem solving tasks that are focused on improving the quality of a written draft. These tasks “provide learners with the opportunities necessary to test their knowledge, learn from their peers, and negotiate meaning, all of which have been shown to be important in the development of second language skills” (p.7). In this study, it was hoped that a combination of students monitoring their own grammatical weaknesses and collaborating with a peer in addressing errors would enable them to make gains in becoming more accurate writers.

### Procedure

Twenty-two students in English Teaching Methodologies III participated in the program. At the time of the study, they were juniors and had a year and a half remaining before they were to become teachers at public schools. Most of them had taken a year-long English writing course which had focused on writing cohesive sentences and essays with an introduction, argument and conclusion. Students' abilities in English ranged from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate.

The writing program, whose details are given in Table 3, began in April, 2004 and ended in August. The pre-test was the in-class final exam for English Teaching Methodologies II that students wrote in February of 2004. The post-test consisted of a take-home final exam in which students were

Table 3. Implementation of the Feedback Log and Peer Feedback

Stage	Steps within Each Stage (Corresponding numbers indicates the orders in which the steps were carried out.)	
Pre Test	Final Examination for Methodologies in English Education II Write about the strengths and weaknesses of the English classes you took in Jr. and Sr. High school and use the SLA theory you learned to support your ideas.	
Introduction of Feedback Codes	<b>Instructor</b>	<b>Students</b>
	1. Return Finals from last semester. 2. Explain the feedback codes and peer response procedure. 4. Check Feedback Response Forms and return them the next class. 5. Give Students Feedback Logs.	3. Using a “Feedback Response Form” students “practice” responding to the feedback codes with a partner. 6. Students write the frequency of each feedback code they received and whether they were able to remedy the problem in their feedback logs.
Assignment 1	<b>Instructor</b>	<b>Students</b>
	3. Return students’ essays with errors marked with Feedback codes. 6. Answers students’ questions during peer feedback time. 8. Check second draft to confirm whether students had successfully responded to the feedback. Comment on the content of the draft also. 9. Return the second draft by the beginning of next class. 10. Design mini-lessons addressing common problems students had.	1. Write a short report evaluating their motivation to learn English or their Language Aptitude (250 Words). 2. E-mail their short essay to the teacher two days before class. 4. Record the Frequency of Feedback codes in their feedback logs in class. 5. Work with a “writing buddy” in class to address the feedback codes (20 Minutes). 7. E-mail their second drafts to the teacher.
Mini Lesson	Dependent and Independent Clauses	
Assignment 2	Topic: L1 Transfer and Learning English Same Format As assignment 1	
Mini Lesson	Articles (A, The, Null Article)	
Assignment 3	Topic: Evaluation of Iwate University Fuzoku Junior High School English Class Same Format as Assignments 1 & 2	
Post Test	Final Examination for Methodologies in English Education III (Pseudo In-Class) Students reflect and evaluate on their learning during the semester by summarizing what they learned and how they will try to apply this knowledge in the future.	
Questionnaire	Students complete a post study questionnaire.	

told to follow the same rules as the previous in-class exam. Students had an hour and a half to finish the pre-test and post-test and were allowed to use class notes as well as a dictionary. After students were returned their finals and feedback logs, they completed a questionnaire asking them to reflect on their experience. Eighteen of 22 participants completed the questionnaire.

In the study, students received grammatical feedback on a total of five essays including the pre and post test. Each essay was analyzed for grammatical accuracy which was interpreted as a student's normalized error score as used in Ferris & Roberts (2001). To ensure that the error marking was consistent, the author marked errors in Assignment 1 a second time six months after initially grading them. The correlation of total errors per student in the initial marking and the second marking was 0.90. According to Chandler (2003), in cases where students' errors in their spontaneous writing are being marked, a high interrater reliability is difficult to attain; thus, the same teacher-researcher marking all errors is more reliable in comparing pre and post treatment samples (p.276).

In addition to grammatical accuracy, complexity of the students' writing in the pre and post tests was compared. With the assistance of two graduate students, the number of clauses in the pre and post tests was counted by hand and complexity was measured as the ratio of additional clauses to total words written and number of additional clauses. Additional clauses refer to clauses in a sentence other than the main clause. This method of measuring complexity was based on that used in Robb et al. (1986).

## Results

Table 4 shows the average frequency of each feedback code in the pre and post test as well as the average standard error score. Three students who wrote that they did not follow the directions for the final examination were removed from this comparison. In the post-test, not only were the frequencies of each error type lower even though the average words increased, but also the standard error score. A paired samples t-test showed the drop in the standard error score to be significant at the 0.001 level ( $T=4.445$ , 18df).

**Table 4. Comparison of words written, frequency of occurrence of each error type, and average standard error score on the Pre-Test and Post-Test**

	Words	V	NE	ART	WC	SS	SS?	Standard Error Score*
Pre Test	434	4.31	4.73	6.07	6.43	4.74	0.83	27.03
Post Test	473	2.86	2.65	3.01	1.81	3.34	0.47	13.98
*Standard Error Score = No. of Errors/ No. of Words * Average No. of Words on the pre and post test (453.)								

Note: (N=19)

Students' grammatical accuracy for assignments 1, 2, and 3 were also compared to see if it improved as the writing program progressed. Table 5 shows the average frequency of each error type as well as the average standard error score for each assignment. A paired sample T-test was used to compare the mean standard error scores of assignments 2 and 3 to assignment 1 as well as assignments 2 and 3 to each

**Table 5. Comparison of words written, frequency of occurrence of each error type, and average standard error score on Assignments 1, 2, & 3 (N=22)**

No.	Words	V	NE	ART	WC	SS	SSQ	Standard Error Score*	Comparison of Means	T Value	Probability
1	192.29	1.77	1.5	1.86	3.05	2.59	0.14	11.62	1 vs. 2	2.339	.029
2	217.05	1.19	1.36	1.67	1.81	2.23	0.36	8.25	2 vs. 3	-.252	.804
3	224.84	1.35	1.06	1.89	2.42	2.55	0.05	8.68	1 vs. 3	1.86	.073

\*Standard Error Score = No. of Errors/ No. of Words \* Average No. of Words on Assignments 1, 2, & 3 (213.7)

other. Table 5 shows the standard error score for assignments 2 and 3 to be lower than that of assignment 1. Furthermore, the difference between 1 and 2 was significant at the 0.05 level. There was not a significant difference between assignments 2 and 3 although the standard error score was slightly higher for the latter. Nevertheless, this score was still marginally lower than that of the first assignment. Lastly, the complexity of language between the pre-test and the post-test was compared. Table 5 shows that there were no significant changes in the two indicators to measure linguistic complexity: The number of additional clauses ( $t = 0.871$ , 18df,  $p = 0.395$ ) and the ratio of additional clauses to number of words ( $t = 2.001$ , 18df,  $p = 0.061$ ).

TEST	Words	Average Number of Additional Clauses	Ratio of Additional Clauses to Number of Words
Pre Test	434	19.05	0.0448
Post Test	473	17.52	0.0377

## Discussion

Although some recent research has shown feedback of error to be more effective than no feedback (Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Ferris and Roberts, 2001), the argument against providing feedback is also strong. In a well-received review of the research on error correction, John Truscott (1996) persuasively argued against error correction. Below, Truscott's arguments are listed and categorized into theoretical issues, practical issues and error correction is harmful; these categorizations were originally made by Truscott himself. Following each argument is a short discussion of how the findings of this study support or contradict the particular argument.

### *Theoretical issues with error correction*

1. Lexical, morphological, and syntactic knowledge are acquired in different manners and thus a teacher would need three different approaches to help students in these areas.

On assignments 1, 2 and 3, students were able to fix 83 percent of mistakes labeled NE, ART, or V, but only 69 percent of errors labeled SS, SS?, or WC. The former group of errors were for the most part morphological errors (verb endings, plural –s etc.) and thus their remedies were fairly clear. The latter group consisted largely of lexical (inappropriate words, language that is not colloquial etc.) and syntactic (sentence-level) errors in which the remedy was not clear. A 69 percent rate of correction among peers is moderately high considering how difficult it is to address errors with no clear remedy. Considering that on the post-study questionnaire, all students answered that they thought working with a peer was helpful for them to improve their writing, it can be reasoned that peer feedback might have been dynamic enough to help students improve their knowledge across the above linguistic categories.

2. Second language acquisition research shows that the mastery of linguistic knowledge is a gradual process and that simple transmission of knowledge from teacher to student will not facilitate this process.

Given that the average error frequency for all feedback categories decreased, the problem-solving nature and deep-thinking involved in the peer work might have helped facilitate students' mastery of linguistic knowledge for which transmission of information from teacher to student is alleged to be ineffective.

### **Practical Issues**

1. Teachers are inconsistent in marking students' errors. A correlation of .90 between the number of errors coded in

assignment 1 and the number of errors coded 6 months later signifies that the marking of errors was generally consistent. There were some inconsistencies with the categorization of errors because of some overlap between the different categories.

2. Error correction is too time-consuming for the teacher.

After adjusting to using the feedback codes, the author was able to mark a first draft of an assignment in 3 to 5 minutes. Checking a student's second draft to see whether they successfully responded to the feedback and comment on the content could take from 5 to 10 minutes. This was too long.

3. Students quite often do not understand a teacher's corrections.

As Appendix 1 indicates, the feedback codes and possible ways to address errors were described in detail in a handout given to the students. Consequently, participants in the study were able to remedy the majority of their mistakes.

### **Error Correction is Harmful**

1. Error correction can be harmful to students because it is unpleasant and students might shorten their sentences (stop taking risks) to avoid correction.

The fact that students' complexity scores decreased was a cause for concern. In the post study questionnaire, one student wrote that this was a problem:

..... Sometimes, I would think too much about the feedback logs when writing and not challenge myself to write complex sentences. Sometimes

after I wrote a sentence I would consult a dictionary and worry about the little things. (Author's Translation)

Thus, it cannot be denied that some students might have avoided writing complex language which can help stretch their linguistic knowledge. To conclude whether this program might have been harmful, we should consider whether the good outweighed the bad. All students save one wrote in the post-study questionnaire that the feedback logs made them conscious of some of their weaknesses:

When proofreading an assignment, I would pay attention to the Feedback Code chart and I was able to find mistakes I had made with a high rate of success. Also, I understood in which area I tended to make the most mistakes (ART) and was conscious of it when writing an assignment. (Author's Translation)

This student started the habit of using the explanation of the feedback codes to proofread her writing assignments before handing them in. In fact, 10 students wrote in the post study questionnaire that they had started the same habit. Thus, one can argue that the benefits of students becoming better self-editors and their grammatical accuracy significantly increasing outweighed the drawback that some students might have written conservatively.

### Conclusion

Although the results of students who did not follow directions were omitted from the analysis, the different conditions in which the students took the pre and post test

cast some doubt on the validity of the comparison. When comparing the standard error scores of the first assignment to the second and third, however, it is evident that students' rate of error decreased. In conclusion, the introduction of feedback codes and peer response in this small trial appears to have had success in helping students improve on their grammatical accuracy while exhibiting a minimum of the shortcomings of error correction discussed by Truscott. But the question remains as to whether these results can be generalized to the larger EFL student population.

The author was fortunate enough to work with students endeavoring to become English teachers. Consequently, as they were highly motivated to improve their grammatical accuracy, the extent to which these results can be generalized is questionable. One possible explanation for why their error rates decreased could be because they became more conscientious monitors of their own writing. Concerning the use of explicit knowledge to the L2 learner, Krashen (1977), cited in Ellis (1994, p.644), writes that "learnt knowledge can be used to monitor and thereby to improve the accuracy of communicative output." In a study of whether a content followed by grammar focus or the opposite is the most effective pattern of feedback for students, Ashwell (2000) concluded that helping students to become independent foreign language writers is ultimately of greater use to students themselves (p.246). Considering that students' grammatical accuracy increased significantly, this study serves as a testament to the importance for a method of feedback to encourage students to be their own monitors.



## PostScript: Directions for Further Research and Applicability of Feedback Logs

The study showed some positive short-term effects but the question remains as to whether the gains that the students made will disappear. To the author's knowledge, there are few longitudinal studies investigating the long-term benefits of feedback on error in writing. Starting in the spring of 2005, a follow-up study of some of the participants will be conducted to monitor their progress and consider the long-term implications of this treatment.

Feedback logs are recommended for those teachers of students who are 1) at least an intermediate level of English and have already studied how to write essays in English; 2) are open to receiving such feedback. Truscott's argument that error correction is too time consuming has merit. In this study, the researcher was able to efficiently mark students' mistakes but, alas, the process of giving grammatical feedback on the first draft, planning for mini-lessons and peer response sessions, monitoring students' progress, and commenting on the content of their second drafts as well as marking which mistakes they had successfully remedied was time consuming. As the students thought it was worthwhile and there were apparent short-term gains, the author considers the time well spent.

Nevertheless, feedback logs will not be effective by themselves: Professor Ferris stated in her email that for error logs (feedback logs) to be effective (a) they should be used consistently, (b) the feedback codes should be tied in explicitly with class mini-lessons, and (c) teacher feedback and peer editing workshops should focus consistently on the feedback categories. Table 3 demonstrates that in this study,

Professor Ferris's advice was followed. For those who are interested in trying this approach, the author invites you to use and improve upon the feedback codes (see Appendix 1), and the feedback log (see Appendix 2).

## Notes

1. In an email communication (February 12, 2004)

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## Appendix 1. Feedback Codes Used in Methodologies in English Education III

Adapted From Ferris (2002)

<p><b>Verb Form (V)</b></p>	<p>1) Error in Verb Tense I <u>play</u> (v) tennis since I was in high school.</p> <p>2) Incorrect use of passives, misuse of modals, auxiliary verbs etc.. In Japan, most people are <u>regarded</u> (V) grammar as important and have little interest in communication.</p> <p>3) The need for a modal or to change the verb to an infinitive or gerund I think if teachers speak more English in the classroom, students English <u>is</u> (V) better. I had no chance to speak English after <u>learned</u> (V) it.</p> <p>4) Missing or incompatible prepositions with verbs ( ^ (V) ) I am <u>interested</u>^(v) history. But if teachers see errors in students' writing they should not <u>mark to</u> (V) them.</p>
<p><b>Noun Ending (NE)</b></p>	<p>1) The noun ending needs to be changed. -Maybe few <u>teacher</u> (NE) point out such problems.</p> <p>2) Missing apostrophes or apostrophe mistakes -They have never heard native <u>speakers</u> (NE) English. -Teachers should not worry about <u>students's</u> (NE) mistakes too much.</p>
<p><b>Article (ART)</b></p>	<p>Missing article, unnecessary article, or incorrect article -I guess they feel uncomfortable when they talk with <u>non-Japanese</u> (ART) or <u>native English speaker</u> (ART). - I cannot eat <u>a salt</u> (ART) because I am pregnant.</p>
<p><b>Word Choice (WC)</b></p>	<p>1) Wrong Word Form I <u>happy</u> lent him my tennis racket.</p> <p>2) Mistakes with Prepositions: So, a teacher should correct a student's errors in the target language. That way is better <u>to</u> students.</p> <p>3) A fixed phrase that should be replaced. <u>In result</u> (WC) of this exposure to English, he was able to learn many fixed phrases with communicative functions.</p> <p>4) Unidiomatic uses (a different word is more appropriate) Each of them had <u>grown</u> their ability in English.</p>

<p><b>Sentence Structure (SS)</b></p>	<p>Sentences, phrases, or words labeled SS need more words, need less words, should be rewritten, should be moved to a different position in the sentence, or should be combined with another sentence. Sometimes, sentences, phrases, or words labeled SS can have multiple errors or errors that are hard to classify and make the sentence difficult to understand.</p> <p>1) <u>Two Sentences Should be Joined</u>                  Japanese cannot speak English <u>well</u>. <u>Because in</u> Japan most students have to study for the entrance examination. (SS)</p> <p>2) <u>Needs to be rewritten</u>.  <u>This Japanese education system is good point</u>. (SS) (これは日本の教育制度の長所だ)</p> <p>3) Needs <u>additional words</u>: (^ <u>SS</u>)                  As a result their skills will be improved <u>and</u> ^ <u>SS</u> <u>more interested in English!</u></p> <p>4) Has <u>unnecessary words</u>: (SS)-                  I think taking English classes everyday is <u>one of good way</u> (SS)- to improve our English education.</p> <p>5) Wrong <u>word order</u>: (SS\$)                  I was taught English communication skills at <u>the only</u> (SS\$) beginning of junior high school.</p> <p>6) <u>Wrong Sentence Position</u>: (SS#)                  I enjoyed <u>very much</u> (SS#) the party.</p>
<p><b>(SS)?</b></p>	<p>As a result of multiple factors, the sentence or phrase cannot be understood and should be rewritten. Either the sentence has numerous grammatical problems or the content of the sentence does not appear to be related to the theme of your report.</p> <p>It is extremely important to provide all students with the opportunity to succeed. Of course, <u>it can say to students. It will become successful if success is fully important.</u></p> <p>(Sometimes to make the sentence understood. The previous sentence, the following sentence or even parts of the paragraph will have to be changed).</p>

**Appendix 2. Feedback Log (Sample)**

Assignment 1			Reflection on Feedback:
No. of Words			
	No.	No. Fixed	
V			
NE			
ART			
WC			
SS			
SS?			
Assignment 2			
No. of Words			
	No.	No. Fixed	
V			
NE			
ART			
WC			
SS			
SS?			
Assignment 3			Reflection on Feedback:
No. of Words			
	No.	No. Fixed	
V			
NE			
ART			
WC			
SS			
SS?			

Assignment 4			Reflection on Feedback:
No. of Words			
	No.	No. Fixed	
V			
NE			
ART			
WC			
SS			
SS?			