

Who wants feedback and does it make any difference?

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In this pilot study 21 participants were given feedback on the content of their weekly journal writing but they were asked to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted error feedback in addition. Approximately half of the participants requested error feedback and the other half did not. They were placed into two groups for analysis: those that requested error feedback every week over the period of a semester and those that never requested error feedback over the course of the semester. The two groups were then compared in terms of their writing ability at the beginning and the end of the academic year, the number of journal entries they submitted and the length of their journal entries. In addition, the writing scores from the beginning and the end of the academic year were compared to ascertain whether the error feedback led to more improvement in writing ability than content feedback alone. The findings suggest that error feedback may help students to improve their vocabulary use. A full scale study would be beneficial to verify this finding.

現在、予備研究では、参加者全員が週刊ジャーナルを書き、その内容についてのフィードバックが与えられているが、エラーフィードバック（間違えに対して指摘をすること）については、参加者個人の選択により、望む場合は与えるようになっている。参加者の半数はエラーフィードバックを求め、残りの半数は求めなかった。彼らは分析のため、2つのグループに分けられた。一学期間、毎週、エラーフィードバックを求めたグループと、一度も求めなかったグループの2つである。この2つのグループは、どのような学生がエラーフィードバックを求めているのかを調べるため比較された。さらに、エラーフィードバックがライティング試験の結果にどんな影響を及ぼすのか調べるため、年度始め及び年度末に行われるライティング試験のデータが分析された。この予備研究はエラーフィードバックが生徒の単語力を伸ばすのに有効である可能性を示した。十分な規模での研究はこの発見が正しいものであるかを証明するのに有効だと思われる。

A NUMBER OF studies have been conducted to ascertain whether or not language learners want error feedback from their teachers on their writing. It is intuitive that some students want teacher feedback and some do not but very little investigation has gone into which kinds of students request feedback.

The current pilot study aims to investigate three research questions: 1) When given a choice, is the preference for feedback related to ability? 2) When given a choice, is preference for feedback related to how hardworking a student is? 3) When feedback is given on single-draft writing and students are not required to pay any attention to it, does it make a difference to students' writing ability as measured by a timed essay task?



Review of literature

Preference for feedback

It would seem that students' confidence is an important factor to consider when thinking about whether or not to give error feedback. Leki (1991) states that whether feedback is encouraging or discouraging depends on the students' preferences. If students request feedback it would probably discourage them not to receive it. On the other hand, if students would rather not have feedback it would discourage them to receive it. In either case, the best way to motivate students is to give them the feedback they request. In her questionnaire data, she found that most students wanted to get feedback from their teacher on their writing.

A disadvantage of feedback outlined in the literature is that it has been found to decrease fluency. The idea is that error feedback leads students to focus more on accuracy, at the expense of fluency. In several studies (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Shepard, 1992) it was found that students who received feedback wrote less than students in control groups.

It has been pointed out by a number of writers that there is a difference regarding the function of writing between ESL writers and their EFL counterparts. It seems that for ESL writers getting across their ideas is most important whereas EFL writers seem to see writing as a different way of practicing their language skills (Tsui & Ng, 2000). It may follow, then, that ESL writers may value feedback on content, but may not value error feedback except in cases where errors prevent their ideas from being understood. EFL learners may value error feedback more than their ESL counterparts. Some studies have been carried out which indeed found this to be the case (Ferris, 1999; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). In a study carried out by Holland (2009) utilizing questionnaire data, all 136 participants, who were EFL learners in Japan, agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (79%) that they needed their teacher's help to find errors in their drafts.

Many studies have used questionnaires to find out students' preferences for feedback on their writing (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; 1996; Lee, 2008; Leki, 1991). To my knowledge, no study has ever ascertained student preferences by actually having them request feedback for the duration of a course. Stating in a questionnaire that one wants feedback does not take much commitment on the part of the respondent, whereas actually requesting feedback from a teacher is a stronger statement for a learner to make. Students may feel that, ideally, they would like to receive error feedback from their teachers and therefore answer in a questionnaire that they would like to receive it. Realistically, many factors may be taken into consideration before actually requesting error feedback in class. For example, a student who knows that they will not have time to read the feedback may decide not to request it, likewise students who do not want to spend the extra time going back over their previous work may not request error feedback in order to save themselves any extra work. Therefore, this study may offer a more realistic appraisal of how many Japanese first-year university students want error feedback on their writing.

Type of feedback

Some writers have discussed the importance of developing learner autonomy in writing classes. The concept of learner autonomy has been one of the main reasons recently for teachers to refrain from giving error feedback. Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) claim that if students follow teacher feedback too closely they do not develop their own cognitive skills during the writing process. They suggest that in terms of the development of writing skills it is better for students to use other feedback sources such as peer feedback or self-editing.

Researchers on feedback in writing have debated what kind of feedback is the most beneficial for the development of writing skills. In a study by Hendrikson (1980) direct error correction was

used. He found that error correction did not have a significant affect on the improvement of students' writing over a six-week period. He has suggested that direct error correction is too explicit, not involving much cognitive processing. Thus it may be better if students have an opportunity to correct the errors themselves.

Holland (2009) asked her participants which form of feedback on grammatical errors they found the most helpful. At the end of a semester, just 5% chose direct feedback while 93% found indirect feedback more helpful. Of those preferring indirect feedback, 55% found feedback indicating the location and type of error to be more helpful, while 45% stated that indirect feedback indicating only the location of the error was more helpful.

According to Ashwell (2000), one further reason for the superiority of indirect feedback is the fact that there are various ways of correcting most errors. To choose only one is to appropriate a learner's writing. Simply signalling that there is an error allows a learner to maintain ownership of the writing.

Since much of the research shows that indirect feedback helps students more than direct feedback, it was therefore decided to use indirect feedback in this study. It appeared that indirect feedback would be more likely to have any effect in terms of improvement in writing ability.

Methodology

The context

The present pilot study was carried out at a private university in central Japan. The participants were all in the same intermediate level first year class and were English majors. Because in the first year the emphasis is placed on speaking and listening skills, the students in this study only had a writing class once a week for 90 minutes. As many of the students had never written an essay in English before entering university, the first semester was spent practicing writing paragraphs before moving on to

essay writing in the second semester. Students were expected to write four paragraphs in the first semester and four five-paragraph essays in the second semester.

The writing teacher of this class also required them to write and submit a weekly journal. The purpose of the journal was to increase fluency in writing and therefore only content feedback was given. The content feedback took the form of questions or comments about the content of the journal entry. At the end of the first semester a course evaluation session was carried out. Some students commented that they wanted the teacher to correct their grammar and spelling errors in their journals rather than just giving comments on content. Students were therefore told that if they wanted feedback on errors they should write that at the top or bottom of their journal entry each week. In this way, if a student started to feel discouraged by the error feedback they could simply stop getting it. Feedback consisted simply of underlined errors so that students could correct the errors themselves. In the same way that there was no obligation to receive error feedback, there was also no obligation for the students to do anything with the feedback.

The journals from the second semester (a period of 11 weeks) were collected and analysed for this research. In total there were 26 students in the class. Of the 26 students, eight requested error feedback on every journal entry, 13 never requested error feedback and the remaining five varied between requesting error feedback and not requesting it. For this reason the five students who varied in their request from week to week were excluded from the study and the remaining 21 students and their journal entries were analysed.

The data

Three sets of data were collected and analysed to see what kind of students were more likely to request feedback. The first data

set consisted of the number of times the journal was submitted by each student over the 11-week period. The second data set was the length of each journal entry. Length was recorded as the number of words per entry. The third data set was the writing scores from the English proficiency test at the beginning and the end of the academic year.

All incoming first year students take the English proficiency test at the beginning of the academic year in March, and are required to take it again at the end of the academic year in January. Analytic rating scales are used for the writing section of the test, essays are rated twice and the scores are scaled using Rasch modelling. Students get a score for each of the four rating scales: organisation, vocabulary, grammar and content. These test scores were used as a pretest and a posttest. The pre-test data was used to ascertain any relative differences between the two groups that might have led one group to request error feedback. The post-test data was used to determine any effect the feedback might have had. Two students failed to take either the pretest or the post-test. Their results were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the number of subjects in this part of the study was 19.

Results

The descriptive statistics for the number of journal entries submitted by students in each group are shown in Table 1. The group who received both content and error feedback are labeled C&E, while the group who received content feedback alone is labeled C.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: Number of journal submissions

Group	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. error mean
C&E	8	10.88	0.35	0.13
C	13	9.38	1.45	0.40

We can see from the standard deviations that, while the students who received content and error feedback did not vary much in the number of journal submissions, the students who received content feedback only varied greatly. In fact, the number of journal submissions from the content and error feedback group ranged from 10 to 11 whereas the content only group ranged from 7 to 11. This is reflected in the high standard deviation of the content only group.

An independent samples *t* test was employed to ascertain whether there was any significant difference in the number of journal submissions between the two groups. The students in the group that only received content feedback submitted their journals significantly less often than those in the group that received both content feedback and error feedback; $t(14.22) = 3.55, p = 0.00$.

The descriptive statistics for the length of journal entries, measured by the number of words per journal entry, are shown in Table 2. In this data set, the standard deviations are very high, indicating that there was a wide variation of journal entry lengths within both groups. The average length of journal entries submitted by each student in the group that received both content and error feedback ranged from 83 words to 249 words. On the other hand, the range of average journal entry lengths amongst the students who received content feedback only was from 39 words to 263 words.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: Journal entry length

Group	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. error mean
C&E	8	158.99	57.22	20.23
C	13	105.63	53.90	14.95

An independent samples *t*-test was employed to ascertain whether there was any significant difference in the length of journal entries between the two groups: $t(19) = 2.15, p = 0.04$. The students who received both content feedback and error feedback also wrote on average significantly longer journal entries than those who received content feedback only.

The descriptive statistics for the students' scores on the writing section of the English proficiency test at the beginning of the academic year are shown in Table 3. Organisation is measured by the organizational structure of the essay, and coherence. Vocabulary is measured by both range and accuracy of words used. Grammar is measured by both complexity and accuracy of grammatical structures. Content is measured by the logical connection between ideas, support for ideas and development of ideas. All scores for the writing section of the test are on a scale of 0 to 4.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: Pretest scores

Group	Scale	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. error mean
C&E	Organisation	8	1.65	0.41	0.14
C		11	1.51	0.58	0.17
C&E	Vocabulary	8	2.25	0.63	0.22
C		11	2.00	0.23	0.07
C&E	Grammar	8	2.03	0.32	0.11
C		11	2.20	0.47	0.14
C&E	Content	8	2.30	0.40	0.14
C		11	1.80	0.68	0.21

An independent samples *t* test was employed to ascertain whether there was any significant difference between the writ-

ing test scores of two groups at the beginning of the academic year: Organisation $t(17) = 0.596, p = 0.559$, Vocabulary $t(8.36) = 1.071, p = 0.314$, Grammar $t(17) = -0.872, p = 0.396$, Content $t(16.47) = 2.025, p = 0.059$. There is no significant difference between the scores of the two groups on the writing section of the English proficiency test at the beginning of the academic year. In terms of writing ability, as measured by the English proficiency test, the two groups were roughly equal at the beginning of the academic year.

The descriptive statistics for the students' scores on the writing section of the English proficiency test at the end of the academic year are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics: Posttest scores

Group	Scale	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. error mean
C&E	Organisation	8	3.0000	0.56181	0.19863
C		11	2.8418	0.77997	0.23517
C&E	Lexis	8	2.8100	0.45280	0.16009
C		11	2.3609	0.47429	0.14300
C&E	Grammar	8	2.6075	0.57378	0.20286
C		11	2.4373	0.42121	0.12700
C&E	Content	8	3.0200	0.56778	0.20074
C		11	2.6564	0.54665	0.16482

An independent samples *t* test was employed to ascertain whether there was any significant difference between the writing test scores of two groups at the end of the academic year: Organisation $t(17) = 0.487, p = 0.632$, Vocabulary $t(17) = 2.076, p = 0.053$, Grammar $t(17) = -0.748, p = 0.465$, Content $t(17) = 1.409, p = 0.177$. There is no significant difference between the

scores of the two groups on the writing section of the English proficiency test at the end of the academic year. In terms of writing ability, as measured by the English proficiency test, the two groups were still roughly equal at the end of the academic year.

From the students' scores on the writing section of the English proficiency test at the beginning and the end of the academic year, gain scores were calculated by subtracting each student's score at the beginning of the academic year from their score at the end of the academic year. Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for the gain scores.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics: Gain scores

Group	Scale	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. error mean
C&E	Organisation	8	1.35	0.82	0.29
C		11	1.33	0.88	0.27
C&E	Vocabulary	8	0.56	0.75	0.22
C		11	0.36	0.65	0.26
C&E	Grammar	8	0.58	0.64	0.23
C		11	0.24	0.68	0.21
C&E	Content	8	0.72	0.61	0.22
C		11	0.86	0.59	0.18

An independent samples *t* test was employed to ascertain whether there was any significant difference between the amount of improvement achieved by students in the two groups over the period of the academic year: Organisation $t(17) = 0.039$, $p = 0.969$, Vocabulary $t(17) = 0.621$, $p = 0.543$, Grammar $t(17) = 1.094$, $p = 0.289$, Content $t(17) = -0.517$, $p = 0.612$. There is no significant difference between the amount of improvement achieved by the students who received content and error feedback when compared with the group who received only content feedback.

Figures 1 through 4 give a visual representation of improvement in the students' writing test scores between the beginning and the end of the academic year.

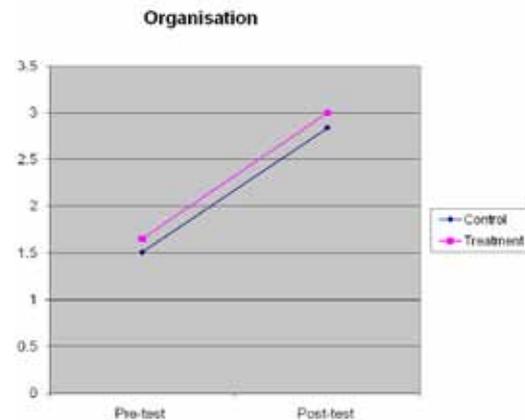


Figure 1. Organisation

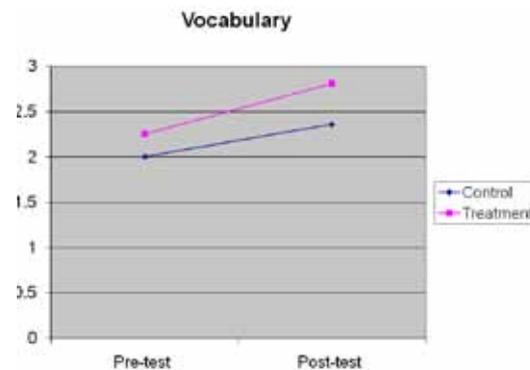


Figure 2. Vocabulary

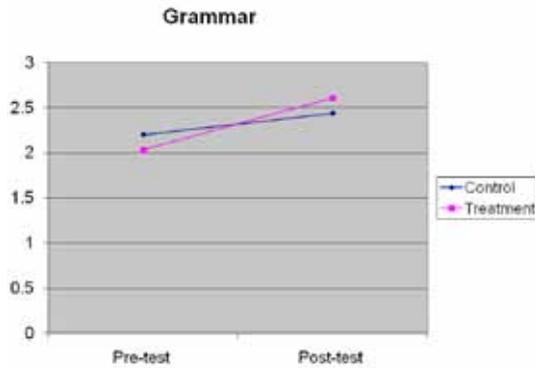


Figure 3. Grammar

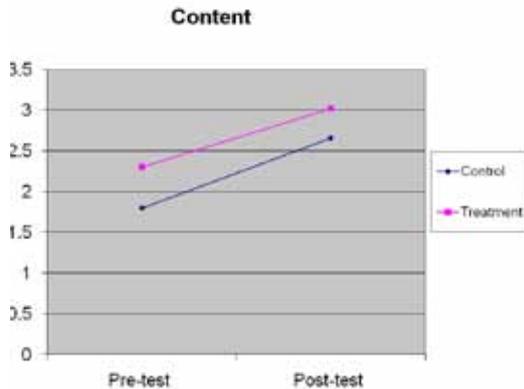


Figure 4. Content

Discussion and conclusion

That the students were roughly equal at the beginning of the academic year was not surprising since it is on the proficiency test scores that students are streamed into ability tiers and the participants in this study were from the same class.

This was a pilot study, comprising just 21 students in one class. As such, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions. However, as can be seen from the *t* test results, the students who consistently requested error feedback every week for the entire semester also submitted their journals more often and wrote longer journal entries. It seems that the students who consistently requested error feedback were more motivated than those who never requested it. It also seems apparent that error feedback did not have the effect of decreasing students' fluency. The students who consistently requested error feedback wrote on average more than those who never requested feedback.

The fact that the difference in post-test vocabulary scores approached significance indicates that students may have been more receptive to feedback on issues such as word choice and word use than they were to feedback on grammar. This was also found by Ferris and Roberts (2001) who analysed improvements in student writing as a result of feedback. They found improvements in word choice, noun endings and verb tenses (but not in article usage or sentence structure).

One year after the data had been collected, I was interested to know how many of the students who had consistently requested error feedback had gone through the feedback and actually corrected the errors marked in their journals. At this stage I sent an email out to all eight students who consistently requested error feedback, asking them whether they had done so. From the eight e-mails I received five replies. Of those five students, four said that they had always gone through and corrected the errors after the journal was returned to them. The other student stated that although she did not correct the errors on paper, she did

go through them in her head and try to think about what was wrong and how to correct it.

It has been stated that if students are not required to revise writing they will not pay attention to feedback and therefore it is a waste of time providing it. Ferris (2002) states: "Studies suggest that students are unlikely to go back and correct errors marked by the teacher when they have already completed the project and received a grade and that such feedback, since students do not pay much attention to it, has little effect on their long-term development" (p. 62). For this reason, it is often argued that error feedback is only appropriate within a process approach to writing. However, it appears that some students spend time reviewing error feedback even when they are not required to do so.

In relation to research question one, the preference for error feedback does not appear to be related to students' ability. There was no significant difference in ability between the group that requested feedback every week and those who never requested feedback at all. In relation to research question two, the preference for error feedback does appear to be related to how hard-working a student is. The students in the group that requested feedback every week wrote longer journal entries and submitted their journals significantly more than those in the group that never requested feedback at all. In relation to research question three, while there were no significant differences between the gain scores of the two groups of students, the difference on the scores for vocabulary in the post test approach significance. It appears that error feedback may improve students' vocabulary choice and use, however, a full scale study is needed to verify this finding.

Bio data

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