

# Form-focused feedback in writing: A study on quality and performance in accuracy

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This paper examines the effect that form-focused feedback has on quality and accuracy in new pieces of writing, and on student perceptions. Seventeen students receiving form-focused feedback and a group of eighteen students receiving no form-focused feedback were examined to investigate the effect of each treatment. Five content areas and three types of grammatical errors were analyzed using paired samples t-tests to trace the differences between two argumentative essays. Student perceptions on the feedback process were also gathered via questionnaires (at the end of the course). Data revealed that both groups made significant gains on quality though differences existed in how each group improved. Independent sample t-tests found that no significant differences existed in student perceptions of the feedback treatment. The results suggest that form-focused correction as compared to no form-focused correction does help to improve grammatical accuracy but improvement comes at the expense of other areas.

この論文は”form-focused feedback”（文法に焦点をおいた指導）がライティングの質・正確さ及び学生の認識においてどのような効果をもたらすか調べたものである。効果を見るため”form-focused feedback”の指導を受けた17名のグループと指導を受けなかった18名のグループを検証した。5つの内容分野と3タイプの文法エラー項目で分析するペアサンプルtテストを学期初めと最後の議論文で行った。また、学期末にはアンケートを行い”feedback”（指導）の過程に関する学生の認識も調査した。結果、各グループの向上の仕方に違いはあるものの両方のグループで議論文の質の有意的向上が見られた。また、”feedback”（指導）に関する学生の認識についてのインディペンデントサンプルtテストの結果は差が見られなかった。よって、文法に焦点をおいた指導は文法の正確さを向上させるのに役立つが、ほかの分野が犠牲になり得ることを示唆している。

**O**VER THE past several decades the role of corrective feedback in second language (L2) writing has been a constant source of interest and debate among teachers and researchers. Research studies examining this issue have made a distinction between feedback on form, which addresses grammatical errors and punctuation, and feedback on content, which often consists of comments to help learners develop and organize their ideas. Much of the debate in L2 pedagogy has involved form-focused feedback and whether it leads to improvement in accuracy and quality in writing.

Studies have found that practical problems exist in the way L2 teachers provide feedback to their students. For example, teacher bias (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990), inconsistency (Zamel, 1985), and poor quality (Zamel, 1985) have been found in how teachers give form-focused



feedback. This has led some experts to argue that the role of form-focused feedback be severely limited (Krashen, 1984; Zamel, 1985), some even claiming that it is harmful because it establishes poor priorities concerning the writing process and diverts attention away from more important writing issues (Truscott, 1996, 1999).

Proponents of form-focused feedback argue that there are convincing reasons for L2 writing instructors to continue providing feedback in their classes. A primary reason is that studies comparing students who received different types of feedback treatments (i.e., direct feedback, indirect feedback, teacher-student conferencing, and error logs) have shown improvement in accuracy (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Lalande, 1982). Another equally important reason is that students value form-focused feedback and think it helpful in improving their writing (Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Leki, 1991).

### Improvement and performance in accuracy

Few studies have directly addressed whether L2 students who receive form-focused feedback improve in accuracy and quality in new pieces of writing, as opposed to those who do not receive any feedback on form. Critics often cite Kepner's (1991) study as convincing evidence that form-focused feedback does not lead to improved accuracy (Polio, Fleck, & Leder 1998; Truscott, 1996). Kepner examined journals from a group receiving direct error correction and a group receiving message-related feedback on both grammar and content. The results indicate that no significant differences in accuracy existed; in fact, the group receiving the message-related comments had more "higher level propositions" in their writing. Other studies by Sheppard (1992), Semke (1984), and Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998) compared various types of form-focused feedback treatments with no correction. Their findings support Kepner's conclusion that

error correction did not help learners to create more accurate writing.

In one of the few studies that examined Japanese foreign language students over a lengthy period (9-months), Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) compared four distinct feedback groups. The data revealed that all four groups significantly improved in accuracy over time; however, no significant improvement in accuracy was found between the four groups, leading the authors to conclude that providing a more explicit or direct feedback on student errors is not justified.

Although many studies have found that error correction does not improve accuracy, research design issues have led some to question the findings. For example, Ferris (2003) argues that some of the studies failed to report pretest measures of errors or information concerning rater reliability, and Polio, Fleck, and Leder's study did not use well-established measurements to trace improvement. Even Robb, Ross, and Shortreed's study measured improvement in groups of students with different levels of proficiency. Thus, there is clearly a need for research that not only compares the effects of receiving form-focused feedback versus no such feedback, but also one that traces long-term effects of such treatments (Ferris, 2002, 2004; Truscott, 1999).

### Student perceptions of form-focused feedback

When examining the issue of form-focused feedback, it is important to consider student preferences and expectations. Studies have found that students desire and expect teachers to correct their errors (Cohen, 1987; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Brice & Newman, 2000), and generally appreciate indirect feedback (noting location and type of error) as opposed to direct feedback (providing actual correction). However, less is known about the effectiveness of grammar instruction as a means to improve quality and accuracy in writing. Some



research has found that grammar mini-lessons and editing sessions coupled with form-focused feedback help students improve in written accuracy (Frantzen and Rissell, 1987; Lalande, 1982). However, other studies report no improvement (Frantzen, 1995; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998). Even less is known about student preferences toward focused grammar lessons and editing sessions. Therefore, research investigating whether grammar mini-lessons and editing sessions help to satiate students' strong preference for form-focused feedback can provide insight on this issue.

In evaluating research to date, a number of issues remain concerning the value of form-focused feedback on L2 writing and student perceptions. Stronger research designs and reporting are needed to provide a reliable framework to show the effectiveness of form-focused feedback on improvement in accuracy and on quality in new pieces of writing. There is a dearth of research examining lower-level students in foreign language teaching contexts, and over prolonged periods of instruction. To address these issues, a 26-week study was undertaken with 35 lower-intermediate EFL students at a Japanese university to investigate the extent to which corrective feedback on targeted linguistic forms helped students improve the accuracy and quality in new pieces of writing, and the impact it has on student perceptions.

### Research questions

1. Are there significant differences in improvement on quality and performance in accuracy among students who receive form-focused feedback versus students who do not receive form-focused feedback?
2. Are there significant differences in how students perceive form-focused feedback versus no form-focused feedback if targeted grammar instruction and editing sessions are provided?

## Methodology

### *Participants and instructional context*

Participants in this study were enrolled in a two-semester compulsory writing course for first-year intermediate students. The participants were Japanese females studying at a private women's university located in Tokyo. Although the students were not English majors, they were required to take English language courses to fulfill their degree requirements. The participants reported having little or no experience in process-oriented expository writing. The primary goal of the writing course was to familiarize students with a process-approach and basic academic writing with particular attention on developing cohesive paragraphs, and organizing ideas into clear, logical compositions. To address this goal, students learned different expository writing genres common to academic environments.

Both writing classes were taught by the same instructor who had more than seven years' experience in writing instruction. The evaluators were two native-speaking English language instructors at the same university with more than six years' experience in writing instruction. Written consent was obtained from each student at the outset. To ensure anonymity, student numbers were used during the rating of the essays.

### *Research design and procedure*

Students from both classes met once a week for two semesters. Each class was 90 minutes and students met 26 times in total. Four five-paragraph expository writing assignments (argumentative, compare/contrast, descriptive, and argumentative) were assigned. Both groups followed the same schedule and the same process of feedback was followed for all essays.

The participants were separated into two treatment groups. Group 1, the control group, consisted of 18 students receiv-



ing feedback only on content. In Group 2, 17 students received feedback on content and indirect feedback on three categories of errors. Each group was required to submit three drafts for each assignment. The first drafts of the two argumentative essays were submitted in Week 5 and Week 22 of the course, and were selected to measure the quality and accuracy in student writing over the course. The topics of both essays were open, and models were provided to help students understand the organizational patterns and rhetorical structures commonly used in argumentative writing. The raters evaluated the essays on a rubric adapted from Ferris and Hedgcock (1998, p.310) for lower intermediate students. Spelling and punctuation were eliminated from the rubric because they were not considered to be grammatical elements. The students were evaluated from 1 to 5 in five categories; main ideas, organization/coherence, supporting ideas, grammar, and vocabulary.

All students were encouraged to write over 400 words for each draft. The first draft was returned with an attached handout that contained positive and constructive comments as well as a preliminary score for each of the five categories. Many of the comments targeted specific problems in the essays and included suggestions on improvement. The same procedure was followed for the second draft. However, selected errors were underlined for the group receiving form-focused feedback. It is important to note that although the raters did score the essays, the instructor provided the comments and indirect correction, and the scoring and commenting on the essays were done independently. When drafts were returned, 30 minutes were set aside in class for students to review the comments and corrections, and make revisions. To help both groups improve their content and grammar during the revision sessions, six mini-lessons (30 minute sessions – three in each semester) were introduced throughout the course. The mini-lessons introduced self-editing techniques and provided practice on identifying and correcting problems in sample essays. Students had time to

revise their essays outside of class and were given three to four days to submit the next draft.

Rather than providing a system of comprehensive feedback (marking all errors), three groups of errors were selected based on frequency and error type. Three categories of error were selected from a short in-class writing assignment, which took place in the second class. Both raters were trained on a coding scheme to identify grammatical errors and a simple percentage agreement was used to measure inter-rater reliability. The raters reported that sentence structure errors were the most common followed by verb errors, word choice errors, and noun ending errors. Although sentence structure errors (i.e. fragments, unnecessary or omitted words and phrases) were the most common, they were not addressed because these errors are generally considered to be too complex for intermediate-level students. To target this area, regular sentence building activities and reading assignments were assigned.

To investigate student perceptions of the method of feedback given, questionnaires were administered after the last draft was submitted. The questionnaire included ten 5-point Likert scale type questions (strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5]) asking how students thought they improved in various content areas and whether or not they understood the teacher's form of feedback. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese to avoid any misinterpretation.

### **Analysis**

Improvement in quality refers to gains made in essay scores and improvement in accuracy refers to using the three selected grammatical forms correctly. The grades in the five content areas and overall quality on the first drafts of each argumentative essay were used to establish pre-treatment and post-treatment measurements between groups. A paired samples t-test was



used to report on any significance found within each group over the treatment period (26 weeks). This process was repeated for assessing accuracy on the selected grammatical forms. The alpha for achieving statistical significance was set at .05. Additionally, effect sizes using Cohen's *d* were calculated on the t-tests to evaluate the stability and strength of significance. A value of .2 is generally considered a small-sized effect, .5 a medium-sized effect, and .8 a large-sized effect.

Because two raters were used throughout the study, inter-rater reliability was measured. Reliability measures were first established using a Pearson product moment correlation coefficient on a random sample of essays before any evaluation or marking was performed on the essays. The overall computed Pearson correlation coefficient was significant for the first essay ( $r = .740, p < .01$ ) and the second essay ( $r = .728, p < .01$ ), which

indicates that a significantly strong relationship was found between the scores assigned by the raters on both essays. After reliability was established, a single rater evaluated the student essays. The same procedure was used to test inter-rater reliability for determining the percentage in using the selected grammatical forms correctly. On both essays the correlation coefficients were highly significant for verb errors and noun ending errors, and significant for word errors.

## Results

The score means and standard deviations for the first and second argumentative essays can be seen in Table 1. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to measure improvement over the course. The data shows that both groups improved in all

Table 1. Paired samples t-tests for essay scores

Category	Essay	Control group (N=18)				Form-focused feedback group (N=17)			
		Mean	T (df=17)	SD	P	Mean	T (df=16)	SD	P
Main Idea	Essay 1	3.00	-2.75	.91	.014*	2.88	-2.38	.78	.030*
	Essay 2	3.55		.51		3.29		.77	
Organization	Essay 1	3.05	-4.76	.72	.000*	2.94	-1.72	.66	.104
	Essay 2	3.72		.57		3.18		.53	
Support	Essay 1	2.67	-4.50	.59	.000*	2.65	-3.49	.61	.003*
	Essay 2	3.44		.51		3.18		.73	
Grammar	Essay 1	2.72	-1.71	.46	.104	2.65	-3.39	.61	.004*
	Essay 2	2.94		.54		3.29		.69	
Vocabulary	Essay 1	2.78	-1.14	.55	.269	2.82	-1.46	.64	.163
	Essay 2	2.94		.54		2.94		.75	
Overall	Essay 1	14.22	-6.75	1.93	.000*	13.94	-4.57	2.13	.000*
	Essay 2	16.61		1.46		15.88		2.45	

Note: \*  $p < .05$

aspects of writing, however, significant gains were made in several categories. For the control group statistical significance was reached over the mean gains for main ideas ( $d = .745$ ), organization ( $d = 1.031$ ), and support ( $d = 1.396$ ) as well as overall. The feedback group made statistically significant improvements regarding main ideas ( $d = .529$ ), support ( $d = .787$ ), grammar ( $d = .982$ ), and overall scores. The Cohen's  $d$  analyses indicated that many of the effect sizes were medium or large. Table 1 provides details of the paired samples t-tests.

Paired samples t-tests were also conducted on the mean percentages to ascertain how the two groups improved in accurately using the three types of grammatical forms. The data reveal that the control group did not show any significant improvement over the course. However, the form-focused group did reach statistical significance on their improvement in verb errors with a medium size effect ( $d = .794$ ). The results of these tests can be seen in Table 2.

Table 3 shows the survey questions and results. An independent t-test was administered to examine if differences existed between the groups on their perceptions of the method of feedback provided. No significant differences were found. Despite

receiving different treatments, both groups generally had similar views of teacher feedback. However, one notable disparity can be seen in the way both groups viewed their improvement in grammar.

## Discussion

One purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of form-focused feedback on improvement in essay scores and performance in accuracy in the use of grammatical forms. The paired samples t-tests confirm that both groups made significant gains in forming main ideas, providing support, and in overall improvement in their new essays. This finding is not surprising considering that both groups of students were exposed to a prolonged period of instruction and were required to produce a substantial amount of writing. The major difference was that the control group had a statistically significant gain in organization scores while the form-focused feedback group showed a statistical significant gain in grammar. Students receiving form-focused feedback undoubtedly benefited from the indirect method of correction, which allowed them a greater opportunity to identify and monitor their mistakes. It is important to mention, how-

**Table 2. T-tests for paired samples on performance in accuracy on grammatical forms**

Grammatical forms	Essay	Control group (N=18)				Form-focused feedback group (N=17)			
		Mean (%)	SD	T (df=17)	P	Mean (%)	SD	T (df=16)	P
Verbs	Essay 1	76.39	8.33	-1.99	.063	74.94	8.66	-3.584	.002*
	Essay 2	79.05	5.70			81.18	6.95		
Words	Essay 1	79.89	7.34	-.297	.770	77.29	6.71	.086	.933
	Essay 2	80.39	6.33			77.18	6.32		
Noun endings	Essay 1	81.17	5.72	-1.486	.155	82.76	7.04	-1.815	.088
	Essay 2	83.78	6.26			86.23	7.30		

Note: \*  $p < .05$

Table 3. Independent t-tests on student perceptions of the feedback process

Question	Control group (N=18)		Form-focused feedback group (N=17)		Mean +/-	P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
1. The type of feedback was easy to understand.	4.0	1.03	3.88	.99	-.12	.73
2. The feedback helped me to improve the main ideas in my essays.	3.94	.94	3.70	1.21	-.24	.52
3. The feedback helped me to better organize my ideas in my essays.	3.78	.94	3.76	1.20	-.02	.96
4. The feedback helped me to provide better support in my essays.	3.33	1.03	3.65	1.06	.03	.37
5. The feedback helped me to improve the grammar in my essays.	3.33	1.14	3.88	.93	.55	.19
6. The feedback helped me to better understand vocabulary in my essays.	3.22	1.21	3.18	1.13	-.04	.92
7. The feedback helped me to improve the overall quality of my essays.	4.0	.97	4.12	.99	.12	.72
8. I was satisfied with the kinds of errors the teacher corrected.	3.72	1.23	4.06	1.09	.34	.39
9. I am better at editing my own essays.	3.55	.92	3.53	1.01	-.02	.95
10. The grammar mini-lessons were helpful for writing and editing my essays.	3.78	.94	4.18	1.01	-.40	.23

Note: \*  $p < .05$

ever, that the improvement in accuracy came at the expense of organization. Even though the form-focused feedback group did improve in organization, the level of improvement was not commensurate with the gains observed in the control group. The same can be said for the control group; they also improved in their grammar scores, but much less so than the group receiving the attention to form. An obvious explanation for this finding is the control group received a smaller amount of feedback, which in turn allowed them to focus more attention on looking at the sample models they received to address the teacher's comments on organization. A likely reason for the gains in accuracy at the expense of content is that students who received form-focused feedback were more preoccupied with correcting grammatical errors as opposed to text-based errors. This is perhaps because

revising grammatical errors is considered more manageable than revising content-based errors. Content-based revisions rely more on knowledge of writing genres, organizational patterns and rhetorical structures, concepts that are often unfamiliar to second language learners. A study by Paulus (1999) investigated "think-aloud protocols" during revision, and supports this premise. The study found that students took more initiative in correcting surface-level errors, and relied on teacher feedback to make content-based revisions.

In examining how students improved their overall essay scores, the results illustrate that the control group made greater gains (a mean difference of +2.39) than the form-focused group (+1.94). One might suggest that this strengthens Truscott's (1996) claim that focus on form is harmful and should be abol-

ished since the feedback group could have made greater gains without it. However, one could argue that error correction did lead to a greater improvement in accuracy, so the treatment helped students to write more accurately. Success, in other words, depends on what outcomes teachers and students expect or desire.

The data concerning how students improved in their performance using the selected grammatical forms suggest that form-focused feedback did contribute to greater accuracy albeit in only one category. The significant gain of the form-focused group in more accurately using verbs contradicts some previous research that compared the effect on accuracy between a feedback group and a no feedback group. It is likely that attention to form helped students notice their common errors and make appropriate revisions on their essays.

The second research question, addressing student perceptions, raises some interesting points. The fact that no significant differences were observed suggests that targeted grammar mini-lessons and editing sessions may have, to some degree, satisfied their desire for grammatical feedback. Despite similar levels of improvement for both groups, the high marks given by the form-focused group on their satisfaction with the teacher feedback and its effect on the overall quality of their writing reveals the strong belief students have that focus on form leads to more improved writing.

### Limitations and conclusion

This investigation tests the underlying assumption of many second language practitioners that students who receive form-focused feedback are better off than those who do not. The study found that lower-intermediate EFL university students benefit from both methods, but in different ways. The results are encouraging since improvement was not merely observed

after a revision session; rather, it was attained over a prolonged period of instruction. Moreover, contrary to earlier studies that have found students want and even expect their writing teachers to give form-focused feedback; the results from the questionnaire indicate that the group receiving no form-focused feedback viewed the teacher's feedback on form positively. This suggests that incorporating mini-lessons that target self-editing techniques and providing time in class for revision can satiate students' grammatical concerns. Before choosing to spend countless hours giving form-focused feedback, L2 writing instructors should be aware that other alternatives exist to address form-related issues. As the data indicates, the group receiving form-focused feedback did significantly improve in grammatical scores and more specifically, verb forms, but these findings are somewhat overshadowed by the greater gains made on overall essay quality by the group not receiving feedback on form. Form-focused feedback seems only preferable in cases where accuracy is a priority. Thus teachers should carefully consider their students' needs and priorities before deciding on a method of feedback.

A limitation of the study is that little is known about the how students processed the revisions. The conclusions are therefore based on post-hoc assumptions about how and why students chose to focus more or less attention on a particular aspect of their writing. Future research should compare the impact of similar types of feedback on other linguistic forms (i.e. sentence structure errors) and target how factors such as self-editing techniques and strategies, influence the revision process. Such studies may offer more insight into the complex nature of revision and offer teachers an alternative to form-focused feedback—one that addresses grammatical correctness without sacrificing improvement in the quality in content.





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