

Direct and Indirect Feedback: How do They Impact on Secondary School Learners' Writing Anxiety and How do Learners Perceive Them?

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Abstract

Previous research has focused mainly on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language acquisition (SLA), but individual differences, such as anxiety, have not received adequate attention. This study seeks to explore the effects of written corrective feedback (WCF), indirect feedback (IF) and direct feedback (DF) respectively on learners' anxiety, and to investigate the beliefs towards WCF in English writing tasks among secondary school English learners in Mainland China. Both qualitative and quantitative methodology were employed in the study. The participants were 80 secondary students selected from the same grade. They were administered a questionnaire based on the Chinese version of the English Writing Anxiety Scale (Tsai, 2008) and were interviewed before and after carrying out four English writing tasks, one task per week. The participants were divided into two groups, one instructed with direct WCF and the other with indirect WCF. The results indicate that 1) DF has a positive effect on alleviating anxiety of making mistakes 2) IF can be helpful in building up confidence in writing in the long run 3) IF can reduce the fear of negative evaluation and 4) most learners claim that IF can improve their language accuracy in the long term but they preferred DF.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, second language acquisition, direct-indirect feedback, language anxiety, secondary school students

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Introduction

For most second language learners, writing continues to be the most challenging task to deal with. Written corrective feedback (WCF) is widely used by teachers during a writing task review in attempting to improve learners' language accuracy. It can be grouped into direct written corrective feedback and indirect written corrective feedback. Direct WCF refers to a correction that not only calls attention to the error but also provides a specific solution to the problem (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Indirect WCF is defined as indicating an error through circling, underlining, highlighting, or otherwise marking it at its location in a text, with or without a verbal rule reminder or an error code (Ferris, 2012).

Despite its being widely researched in SLA, the bulk of research on WCF has mostly dealt with either the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of different types of WCF. Each learner possesses different personal characteristics. Dornyei (2005) considers "enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree" as individual differences. Anxiety is one of the factors responsible for individual differences. Most foreign language learners and second language learners experience language anxiety. Anxiety can hamper learners' confidence, self-evaluation, and furthermore, language performance. WCF is considered to facilitate learners' writing but still it causes anxiety to some extent. How do indirect and direct WCF impact on English learners writing anxiety in secondary schools? WCF is usually given by language instructors from the perspective that learners can be aware of their incorrect usage of the target language and reduce their mistakes. In this study, learners' perceptions pertaining to indirect and direct WCF will be explored.

Literature Review

Written corrective feedback (WCF) is regarded as an instructional pedagogical strategy to facilitate L2 writing effectiveness. WCF varies in terms of its focus, types and other features. With respect to types of WCF, Ellis (2009) provided a comprehensive typology, including direct and indirect WCF. Direct WCF indicates that teachers will directly point out where the errors are, cross out the unnecessary utterances, insert the missing words, phrases and morphemes, write down the right form below or near it, or more thoroughly, rewrite the whole sentences; whereas indirect WCF refers to the way that teachers only underline or highlight the wrong form without commenting on why it is not right or how it can be corrected.

Some researchers have sought to compare the efficacy of these two types of WCF and the combination of these two types and others. Lalande (1982) found that students who were given indirect WCF outperformed students receiving direct WCF. Ample studies have shown that both direct and indirect WCF work effectively in improving target language accuracy over time (Frantzen,1995; Rob, Ross&Shortreed,1986). Recent studies by Asadi and Rahimi (2014) revealed that indirect groups wrote more accurately in their essays over time. Findings from Salimi and Ahmadpour (2015) suggested that direct and indirect WCF had equal short-term effect in developing learners' accuracy while direct WCF showed a more significant long-term effect compared to indirect WCF. Due to the variety of methods used, the results are still inconclusive.

Anxiety is an important aspect of affective factors and affects learners' second language acquisition. Foreign language anxiety has been defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Howitz, Howitz & Cope, 1986). With respect to types of foreign language anxiety, Howitz et al. (1986) identified communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. They developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale to measure learners' anxiety. Writing anxiety was first explored by Daly and Miller (1975), who developed a Writing Apprehension Test to discern first language writing apprehension and scale the writing anxiety. Potential writing anxiety contributors can be linguistic ability, cognitive factors, socio-psychological issues, the clash between FL writers' first language and target language culture, and learners' or instructor's beliefs about writing and writing environments.

In recent studies, Jen (2003) found that secondary students experienced anxiety triggered by personality factors, fear of negative evaluation, low English proficiency, lack of preparation, pressure from language instructors and test and parental pressure. Rahmi and Dasjerdi (2012) investigated the efficacy of immediate and delayed CF in improvement of learners' complexity, fluency and accuracy in oral production and revealed that delayed CF outperformed immediate CF and learners treated with delayed CF had a lower level of anxiety. In another study by Shabami and Safari (2016), learners from both groups - immediate CF group and delayed CF group - experienced some levels of anxiety when receiving corrective feedback from the teachers. The significant relationship between language anxiety and error correction is ascertained. Assessment of learners' viewpoints across CF types on their level of anxiety needs to be further confirmed.

Methodology

Research questions

Both a qualitative and a quantitative approach were employed in this study to form some understanding of the relationship between indirect and direct WCF and writing anxiety. The following research questions were explored:

1. How do direct and indirect WCF impact on secondary school English learners' writing anxiety?
2. How do learners perceive direct and indirect WCF?

Participants

The participants were 80 students selected from the same grade in a secondary school in Mainland China. They were divided into two groups, Group 1 and Group 2. Both of the two groups were treated with different WCF, G1 with indirect WCF, and G2 with direct WCF over a period of 4 weeks.

Instrument

The questionnaire employed in this study was the 28 English Writing Anxiety Scale adopted by Tsai (2008). The participants involved in Tsai's study were university students. Concerning the discrepancy of the participants' writing ability level and

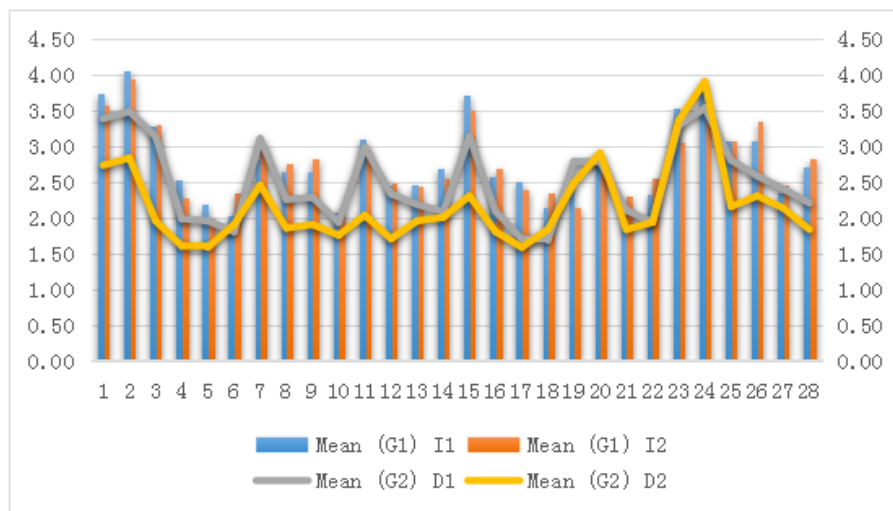
learning environment, the questionnaire was adjusted to fit the target participants in this study. At the beginning is the demographic information that needs to be filled in, including gender, age and which class he/she is from. The questionnaire consists of 28 items. The participants were asked to rate the extent to which the proposed statements echoed their own thoughts by using a 5-point scale from 5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree. A high score suggests a high degree of agreement with the statements. (See Appendix B).

Data Collection Procedure

Two groups of the participants were first given a questionnaire in order to measure their writing anxiety. Within the four weeks the two groups were treated with different WCF, G1 with indirect WCF and G2 with direct WCF. Four weeks later their writing anxiety was tested again to compare with the former results. Interviews were conducted twice, one after the first questionnaire and the other after the second. The questions they needed to answer for the two interviews were different (see Appendix A).

Findings

Table 1: Means of 28 items of G1 and G2 before and after treatment



After the administration of the questionnaire, the data were collected and analysed. The questionnaire has 28 items to be answered based on a five point Likert scale. Bars stand for the means of 28 items of G1, before the group was treated with indirect WCF and after. Lines represent 28-item means of G2, treated with direct WCF before and after. As Table 1 indicates, the high scores of G1 and G2 overlap on Items 1, 2, 15 and 24, which reveals whether using words, expressions and grammar correctly is a main factor leading to participants' writing anxiety. They positively believe they will be able to write well as long as the writing topic is not beyond their knowledge. The low scores appear to be allocated to Item 5, 6, 17 and 18, which show slight traces of English writing anxiety from the present participants, starting to feel panic when writing an English composition, worrying that teachers cannot understand the expressions in their writing, being tense about the writing test, etc.

Participants' writing anxiety can be calculated by adding his/her ratings. As presented in Table 2, before the treatment, the mean is 77.95 and after the treatment it is 77.23. Independent samples T-test was used to test the significance of difference, which further confirms there is no significant effectiveness of indirect WCF to relieve writing anxiety of participants. Compared to G1, the mean scores of before and after treatment show that direct WCF poses significant positive impact on reducing participants' writing anxiety. The data also reveals that the two groups of participants share a big anxiety gap; some are extremely anxious about their writing but some are totally on the contrary.

Table 2: Group 1-indirect group

Writing Anxiety (G1: indirect group)				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Before	77.95	13.87	52	104
After	77.23	15.19	52	105
p=0.83				

Table 3: Group 2-direct group

Writing Anxiety (G2: direct group)				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Before	69.73	17.20	46	108
After	60.475	19.66	36	104
p=0.03				

The impact of the two kinds of treatments is diverse. The changes between before and after the treatments are quite subtle but with significance and implications. G1 received indirect WCF but there was no prominent positive impact on the participants according to the data. Actually, the mean scores of some items rise after the treatment, especially Item 6 from 2.03 to 2.35, Item 22 from 2.33 to 2.55 and Item 26 from 3.08 to 3.35. The increase of the scores indicates that indirect WCF might need more sophisticated implementation procedures and learners' sentiment is better evaluated and considered before and during the treatment. Otherwise, there will be a negative impact on learners' English writing performance. A sharp increase in the mean score of G2 is detected in Item 24 from 3.53 to 3.90, which indicates that direct WCF can be helpful in supporting learners' confidence in writing to some extent.

Table 4: Item 1-18 and means of Item 1-18

Statement	Mean (G1)		Mean (G2)	
	I1	I2	D1	D2
1. When writing an English composition, I worry about whether the words and expressions used are correct.	3.73	3.58	3.38	2.73
2. I feel anxious about whether the grammar used is correct when I am writing an English composition.	4.05	3.95	3.48	2.83
3. I get upset when I find my English composition filled with red marks from the teacher.	3.28	3.30	3.13	1.95
4. I feel nervous when reading instructions for the topic in English writing.	2.53	2.28	1.98	1.60
5. I feel panicky when I start writing an English composition.	2.18	1.98	1.95	1.58
6. I worry about whether the teacher understands what I write in English.	2.03	2.35	1.80	1.90
7. I think other students are better at English writing than I am.	2.80	3.00	3.10	2.45
8. Before taking a writing test, I feel jittery about what is going to happen.	2.65	2.75	2.25	1.85
9. I find it stressful to write my ideas down in English.	2.65	2.83	2.28	1.90
10. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in writing an English composition.	2.08	2.10	1.93	1.75
11. I am afraid that what I write in English cannot meet my teacher's expectations.	3.10	2.95	2.98	2.03
12. The thought of revising my composition give me a lot of pressure.	2.45	2.48	2.33	1.70
13. I usually worry about how to revise my written work in English.	2.45	2.43	2.18	1.95
14. I feel anxious if my English writing needs to be graded.	2.68	2.55	2.08	2.00
15. An unfamiliar writing topic makes me anxious.	3.70	3.50	3.13	2.30
16. Whenever I think my teacher is ready to correct the mistakes in my English composition, I get worried.	2.58	2.68	2.08	1.80
17. Taking English composition exams makes me feel nervous.	2.50	2.40	1.70	1.58
18. I am often distressed after a writing test.	2.15	2.35	1.68	1.83

Table 5: Item 19-28 and means of 19-28

19. I do not worry about making mistakes in sentence structure when writing in English.	2.48	2.15	2.78	2.48
20. A writing class is enjoyable to me when writing errors are not emphasized so much.	2.88	2.63	2.78	2.90
21. I get nervous when the time for a writing task is running out.	2.20	2.30	2.10	1.83
22. The thought of my writing being judged by my English teacher makes me tense.	2.33	2.55	1.93	1.93
23. I am happy to write sufficient details to support my ideas.	3.53	3.05	3.28	3.35
24. I think I can write good English compositions.	3.80	3.43	3.53	3.90
25. I feel nervous in a writing class when the teacher's expectations are too high.	3.08	3.08	2.80	2.15
26. I worry about the consequence of failing my English writing test.	3.08	3.35	2.58	2.30
27. I am afraid that my classmates will find fault with my English compositions if I discuss it with them.	2.35	2.45	2.40	2.13
28. Even if I am well prepared for an English writing test, I still feel tense about it.	2.70	2.83	2.20	1.83

During interview participants responded to the questions in terms of the cause of anxiety. The results echo the data collected from the questionnaire. Words, expressions and grammar are the three main factors that trigger writing anxiety. Lack of writing skills, poor organization ability, low proficiency in English and stress from instrumental factors, like scores, scolding and even punishment, all promote their writing anxiety.

Before receiving the treatment, the suggestions from the learners indicate their inclination towards direct WCF and the problems they encountered when they decipher the WCF symbols. Regarding the WCF they received, the difficulties G1 and G2 face are quite similar: not understanding teachers' feedback, being afraid to ask for teachers' help, no clues about the mistakes, etc. When it comes to the benefits of WCF, they claim that with the help of WCF, especially IF, they can better understand the topic, organize the writing structure, correct the grammar and remember the words than before. Their writing accuracy has been improved as well as their writing performance and ultimately their scores. General inclination cannot include individual cases. DF can provide more direct writing support for learners than IF. After receiving DF, learners' behaviours are quite different. Some act positively, correcting errors autonomously, thinking about the reasons leading to the failure, asking for help from teachers or classmates, while some act negatively, just following the feedback without any reflection upon the errors they made. Most learners recommend both direct and indirect WCF: indirect WCF promotes further reflection upon the errors and correction, which facilitates the further memorization of the relevant words, expressions and grammar; direct WCF, on the one hand, can be pretty instantly helpful and effective, but on the other hand it may account for heavy reliance on teachers' help in the English writing task. More learners preferred indirect WCF because they believe in the long term effect it brings. Learners with low confidence in themselves would rather receive indirect WCF because it can reduce their fear of negative evaluation.

Implication

Upon data gathering, data analysis and findings, several implications can be inferred from the current study related to teachers and students. Teachers should be trained how to render WCF effectively and elaborate on the correction symbols before students get back the feedback. They need to encourage students, not only to strengthen their confidence, but also to use WCF in a more effective way. Whether to choose IF or DF or combine them depends on the students learning preferences and performance. The answer cannot be easily determined. From the perspective of a learner, dealing with WCF needs patience and confidence. Language proficiency is the Achilles' heel for some learners. If matters come up concerning language proficiency, asking for help from your peers and teachers is always a wise option.

Conclusion

This small-scale study examined the impact of direct and indirect written corrective feedback on secondary school English learners' writing anxiety and shed light on the perceptions of secondary school English learners towards these two kinds of written corrective feedback. Direct WCF exerts a positive impact on target learners' writing anxiety. Indirect WCF can be helpful to build up their confidence and improve their writing accuracy in the long run and reduce their fear of negative evaluation, but direct WCF is much more preferred.

To improve the validity and reliability, enlarging the capacity of the sample would be a good choice. The sample can be randomly picked from several secondary schools. Each school can be allocated a specific quota. In this study, the instrument adopted was designed for technology university students not secondary English learners. A

customized instrument will definitely improve the validity and enable a deeper insight into writing anxiety and WCF. This variable is trivial but indeed is of significance.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

First Interview Questions:

1. Could you tell us what might cause your writing anxiety?
2. Do you have any suggestions or advice for your teachers' written feedback?

Second Interview Questions:

1. What are the problems you face when you receive correction based on the error symbols or when your errors are corrected directly?
2. How does corrective feedback help you in writing?
3. When you get back your revised composition from the teacher, what do you do usually?
4. Will you recommend this feedback to be practiced by teachers? Why? Why not?

Appendix B

This is a questionnaire about writing anxiety. Please fill in the following information.

1. Class: 2. Age: 3. Gender:

Please rate from 1-5 that fits your thought and fill in the number in the brackets.
Thank you. (5= strongly agree ;4= agree ;3=neutral ;2=disagree ;1=strongly disagree)

1. When writing an English composition, I worry about whether the words and expressions used are correct.
2. I feel anxious about whether the grammar used is correct when I am writing an English composition.
3. I get upset when I find my English composition filled with red marks from the teacher.
4. I feel nervous when reading instructions for the topic in English writing.
5. I feel panicky when I start writing an English composition.
6. I worry about whether the teacher understands what I write in English.
7. I think other students are better at English writing than I am.
8. Before taking a writing test, I feel jittery about what is going to happen.
9. I find it stressful to write my ideas down in English.
10. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in writing an English composition.
11. I am afraid that what I write in English cannot meet my teacher's expectations.
12. The thought of revising my composition give me a lot of pressure.
13. I usually worry about how to revise my written work in English.
14. I feel anxious if my English writing needs to be graded.
15. An unfamiliar writing topic makes me anxious.
16. Whenever I think my teacher is ready to correct the mistakes in my English composition, I get worried.
17. Taking English composition exams makes me feel nervous.
18. I am often distressed after a writing test.
19. I do not worry about making mistakes in sentence structure when writing in English.
20. A writing class is enjoyable to me when writing errors are not emphasized so much.
21. I get nervous when the time for a writing task is running out.
22. The thought of my writing being judged by my English teacher makes me tense.
23. I am happy to write sufficient details to support my ideas.
24. I think I can write good English compositions.
25. I feel nervous in a writing class when the teacher's expectations are too high.
26. I worry about the consequence of failing my English writing test.
27. I am afraid that my classmates will find fault with my English compositions if I discuss it with them.
28. Even if I am well prepared for an English writing test, I still feel tense about it.