A Study of Written Corrective Feedback and Its Effect on Chinese Junior Learners' English Writing[*]

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This study was designed to investigate the effect of written corrective feedback (WCF) on junior English learners' writing. Eighty-two Chinese junior students from two classes were observed in a draft-to-draft writing program. Results included error distribution and WCF's effect on the subjects' writing. Specifically, the number of local errors dropped more significantly than that of global errors. Both direct feedback (DF) and indirect feedback (IF) worked for local errors, but they did not have noticeable effects on global errors. For some errors as wrong word, DF was almost helpless in eliminating them, but IF worked better since it could engage students in reflecting on their own errors. For Chinglish and word order errors, however, IF's role was very limited in revision and correction, due to students' inefficient syntactic knowledge. This study indicated that WCF had varying effects for different types of errors and a combination of DF and IF might be more helpful. In addition, positive input and certain amount of explicit grammar teaching are necessary for long-term improvement of accuracy in writing.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, accuracy, junior learners, writing

Introduction

Whether corrective feedback (CF) and error correction facilitates second language (L2) learning remains a controversial issue among second language acquisition (SLA) and L2 writing scholars. However, agreement exists among scholars that accuracy in writing is very important, for student writers do need error feedback from their teachers (Ferris, 2013, p. 396). Corrective feedback plays a pivotal role in L2 learning, contributing to better overall L2 performance than similar instruction without CF (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013). As for whether teachers should provide grammar correction to students and whether such feedback produces any short-term or long-term effects on student writing, there is disagreement, even controversy among scholars and teachers. Some, especially Truscott (1996), believed grammar correction has no effect by arguing that practical problems such as teacher limitations and students' inattention that render the hypothetical benefits of grammar correction unlikely, and that, in the end, time spent on correction is actually harmful to student writers because it takes time and energy away from other more important writing concerns. Others, especially Ferris (1999), argued against Truscott that a great deal more research is needed before anyone can claim that error feedback should be universally embraced or abolished. Ferris (1999) not only pointed out the limitations of the Truscott' study, but also carried outsome studies (Ferris, 1995; Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000),

proving that corrective feedback was helpful to improve the accuracy of language. Ferris (2006) also found that teachers' feedback improved students' writing ability in both long-term and short-term run.

More studies were carried out on the effect of CF on student writers' composition. The studies conducted by Bitchener (2008) and Hartshorn et al. (2010) both indicated that written corrective feedback (WCF) brought about significant improvement in accuracy in students' writing. Relevant studies in China also explored the effectiveness of written feedback and its positive influence on students' writing (ZHANG & GUO, 2007; CHEN & LI, 2009; LI, 2013; L. J. YANG, M. J. YANG, & ZHANG, 2013). In contrast, there are studies showing that WCF does not help so much (BEI, 2009; JIANG & ZENG, 2011). For example, BEI Xiao-yue's (2009) experiment showed that feedback helped little in improving the quality of students' writing, probably due to improper ways of teachers' feedback or other unknown factors.

As for which kind of feedback plays a better role in improving students' language accuracy, there is also disagreement. Some scholars (For example, ZHANG & DENG, 2009) argued that indirect feedback (IF) group outperforms direct feedback (DF) group. However, CHEN and LI's (2009) research indicated that DF was superior to IF. JIANG and CHEN (2013) found meta-language feedback excelled IF for Chinese students in acquiring demonstrative noun phrase.

As could be seen from the literature review above, the research results vary and scholars differentiate their opinions from each other. The current research results cannot fully explain whether WCF is valid or not and the debates about the superiority of one type of feedback over another do not come to an end. More systematic researches are needed to its further verification. In order to get a clearer picture of the role of error feedback and correction, questions, such as "what errors to correct", "when to correct them", "how to feedback", and "whose errors are corrected", should be taken into consideration.

This study is designed to investigate how WCF works in improving Chinese junior students' accuracy in writing and what different roles different types of feedback play on different errors. Ten popular types of grammar errors are surveyed and both DF and IF are provided for the students to see how effective they are.

Research Design

Objectives and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how teachers' WCF is related to the subjects' written language performance and which kind of feedback works better for students' performance. The following questions are to be answered:

(1) What are the most frequent errors in Chinese Junior students' writing?

(2) Does teacher's written corrective feedback help students improve their accuracy in writing?

(3) Which type of corrective feedback is more helpful, indirect or direct feedback, and for what type of errors do they work better?

Methodology

Subjects. Subjects for this study were 82 junior students from two classes of Grade seven in a rural Middle School in eastern Guangdong Province, China. Among them were 40 boys and 42 girls. Most of them are living in the countryside with their parents or grandparents. Their ages range from 12 to 14. They started learning English in the third year of primary school and had an experience of 3.5 years of English learning. Their English was taught by the same teacher. It was found from the results of junior school entrance

examination that students in the two classes were of the same level of English language. On the whole, these subjects may represent the average level of English of junior middle school students in eastern Guangdong rural areas.

Procedure of data collection. A writing task was assigned for the students, which lasted three weeks. In the first week, all students were asked to write a short essay in class to introduce themselves or one of their friends. Information such as family background, hobby, and future ambition must be included. After collecting the first draft (Draft A), the teacher went through their compositions after class and provided written feedback on language errors. In the second week, the teacher gave the compositions back to the students and asked them to revise their errors and write the second draft (Draft B) in class in 20 minutes. The teacher again marked and commented on Draft Bs after class, and in the third week, the subjects got their draft Bs and new feedback and again were asked to make revisions in the third draft (Draft C) in class within 20 minutes. Feedback was given in different ways for the two classes, one receiving direct feedback (DF), while the other class indirect feedback (IF). Direct feedback may take various forms, including crossing out an unnecessary words, phrase, or morpheme; inserting a missing word or morpheme; or providing the correct form near the erroneous one. Indirect feedback occurs when the teacher indicates in some way that something is wrong by underlining, circling, coding or using other marks, but does not provide the correct form, leaving the students to solve the problem that has been called to his/her attention (Ferris, 2013, p. 398):

(1) Erroneous sentence: There are many pens are on the desk.

(2) Direct Feedback: There are many pens ~~are~~ on the desk.

(3) Indirect feedback: There are many pens are on the desk.

Occasionally, the teacher may offer metalinguistic clues in indirect feedback, either in English or Chinese, so that subjects would be aware that an error has been made. Such metalinguistic feedback contains either comments, information, or questions related to the error correction, without explicitly providing the correct forms (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Metalinguistic comments indicate that there is an error somewhere (e.g., *There is an error here*). Metalinguistic information provides either some grammatical metalanguage that refers to the nature of the error (e.g., S*ingular form*) or a word definition in case of lexical errors (e.g., *It's a noun*). Metalinguistic question also points to the nature of the error but attempts to elicit the information from the subject (e.g., *Third person?*).

Altogether 246 compositions from 82 students were collected during the three weeks. Nine compositions, three from each round of drafts, were excluded because they were totally unintelligible, so 237 of them were used for analysis. After each round of feedback was made, the teacher asked the subjects to revise their drafts, without telling them how to correct the errors. The subjects were allowed to make any revisions in both language forms and contents of their compositions. All the errors were collected and coded according to different grammatical categories. We listed 10 types of errors, as illustrated below (see Table 1):

Table 1

Error Types and Examples

Error type	Description	Examples
Omission (OM)	A word that is missing.	My brother ^only 5 years old. Joe ^ from Spain.
Surplus (SUR)	A word that is not necessary.	We are like reading. There are pencils and a ruler are in my schoolbag.
Chinglish (CH)	A sentence that is constructed in a Chinese way, and not in accord with the English syntax.	She cooks food are very delicious. His students are all very like him.
Subject-verb disagreement (SV DIS)	A verb that does not agree with the subject in number.	He like fruit. There are a set of keys in his bag.
Wrong spelling (SP)	Misspelling, or an incorrectly spelled word.	His father is a docter. They are father and mather, brother and him.
Wrong word (WW)	Misuse or strained use of words.	They are five people in my family. Why does he tall?
Wrong plural and singular form (PLU & SIN)	Misuse of plural and singular nouns.	He has two basketball and four volleyball. There are six peoples in Betty's family.
Misuse of parts of speech (PS)	A word in the wrong form of part of speech.	His room is clean because he likes tidy. Alice's brother is a Canada boy.
Wrong pronoun (WP)	Misuse of pronouns.	She name is Smith Ella. The students in his class all like he.
Wrong word order (WWO)	The misplace of nouns in a sentence.	This book I not like. The game you want play is not Ok.

Findings in the Study

Error Distribution

Findings in direct feedback class (DFC). After the data were collected, we got an exact number of each type of errors in students' composition drafts. Table 2 shows the data of error number from DFC. In Draft A, omission ranks the top; wrong spelling is the second most frequent error; subject-verb disagreement and wrong pronoun are the third most common errors; misuse of parts of speech also takes up its dominance; Chinglish and surplus are the least prevailing errors. In Draft B, the error number of omission, wrong plural and singular form, spelling, the word order, and misuse of parts of speech and pronoun is reducing, but the reduction is not so significant; however, the error of surplus, subject-verb disagreement, and wrong word increased. According to Draft C, students achieved remarkable reduction of errors on four major categories, especially the error of omission, which decreased by 64.4%.

Table 2

Errors in Subjects' Writing From DFC

Error type	Draft A	Draft B	Draft C
Omission	45(18.2%)	38↓	16↓
Wrong spelling	34(14.2%)	29↓	15↓
Subject-verb disagreement	33(13.8%)	41↑	21↓
Wrong pronoun	32(13.4%)	29↓	24↓
Misuse of parts of speech	28(11.7%)	21↓	17↓
Wrong plural and singular form	20(8.4%)	18↓	11↓
Wrong word	19(7.9%)	24↑	25↑
Wrong word order	11(4.6%)	6↓	5↓
Surplus	9(3.8%)	10↑	7↓
Chinglish	8(3.3%)	8	10↑
Total	239	224↓	151↓

Note. ↓↑: Symbols indicating rise or fall of error numbers.

The total number of errors dropped from 239 in Draft A to 224 in draft B, and further to 151 in Draft C. It is evidently clear that after the teacher's direct feedback and the subjects' revision and correction in the first two drafts, the students made fewer of errors in their writing.

Findings in indirect feedback class (IFC). In draft A, the students from IFC are more likely to make errors of omission (16.6%) and subject-verb disagreement (15.8%). The second commonly observed errors are misuse of parts of speech (13.4%), wrong spelling (12.6%), and wrong pronoun (12.1%). Wrong plural and singular form and wrong word have the same proportion of 8.9%. The ratio of surplus is 4.0%, Chinglish, 4.9%, and the wrong word order, only 2.8%. Compared with Draft A, the total number of errors in Draft B reduced. There are fewer errors in omission, Chinglish, subject-verb disagreement, wrong plural and singular form, wrong spelling, and misuse of parts of speech. However, the number of surplus, wrong word, wrong word order, and wrong pronoun errors increased. As a whole, students cut down their errors from 247 in Draft A to 217 in Draft B. We found in Draft C that except surplus, Chinglish, wrong word order, and wrong pronoun, the other types of errors all decreased. Surplus increases from 10 in Draft A to 21 in Draft C; subject-verb disagreement decreases from 39 in Draft A to 19 in Draft C. In addition, wrong spelling, wrong plural and singular form, and omission errors also have a relatively high reduction. And the totality has reduced by 21.9% (see Table 3).

Table 3

Errors in Subjects' Writing From IFC

Error type	Draft A	Draft B	Draft C
Omission	41(16.6%)	40↓	27↓
Subject-verb disagreement	39(15.8%)	21↓	19↓
Misuse of parts of speech	33(13.4%)	29↓	25↓
Wrong spelling	31(12.6%)	20↓	15↓
Wrong pronoun	30(12.1%)	35↑	31↑
Wrong plural and singular form	22(8. 9%)	11↓	8↓
Wrong word	22(8.9%)	23↑	21↓
Chinglish	12(4.9%)	10↓	13↑
Surplus	10(4.0%)	17↑	21↑
Wrong word order	7(2.8%)	11↑	13↑
Total	247	217↓	193↓

Note. ↓↑: Symbols indicating rise or fall of error numbers.

To present the distribution of errors in Draft A in both classes, we use Figure 1 to illustrate. As is shown, omission, subject-verb disagreement, wrong spelling, misuse of parts of speech, and wrong pronoun are most frequent errors in both classes (well above 10%). Omission ranks the first in both classes. The frequency of the four types of errors is similar in both classes. This demonstrates that the subjects in both classes have difficulty in writing complete sentences (often making omission errors). And they are equally poor in spelling, subject-verb agreement, part of speech, and pronoun usages. The less pervasive errors among all the subjects are plural and singular forms and wrong words (between 10% and 8%). The least common errors, however, are word order, surplus, and Chinglish (well below 10%). Why is so?

As for the omission error, students mainly omitted subject, article, and object, for example, "*He is doctor*", "*She studies in middle school*", "*My mother doesn't like, because is very boring*". These errors are either the results of first language (L1) interference or the results of lacking grammatical knowledge. Because in Chinese,

there is no article, and in many cases, subject or/and object can be omitted. When one is asked why not to eat apples, for example, one often answers "我不喜欢" (*I don't like*) rather than "我不喜欢苹果" (*I don't like apples*). Subject-verb disagreement is also the result of L1 interference. In Chinese, there is no change of form in the use of the verbs for different person, voice, and tense. While in English, all of these should be taken into consideration, for example, "*She goes to the library*", "*She went to the library*", "*She has gone to the library*", and "*They go to the library*". In Chinese, "goes", "went", "gone", and "go" all share one form "去" (go). When it comes to the misuse of part of speech, we have found that most students have no idea about it. When choosing a word, they often consider the meaning, but pay little attention to its part of speech. For instance, they say "*He likes play basketball*" or "*She likes tidy*" without knowing that "play" and "tidy" are wrong forms. As for the pronouns, students seem to be unaware of the concept of case and cannot distinguish the nominative case from the objective case or possessive case (e.g., *She name is Mary*). And this can be also attributed to L1 interference, because in Chinese both the nominative and the objective cases of pronouns share one same form, with "he" and "him" having one equivalent "他". In addition, while school teachers advocate communicative teaching approach, grammar teaching has been largely neglected, so most students have difficulties producing grammatically correct sentences, especially when they have not received insufficient positive input.

Most of the above-mentioned errors can be categorized as local errors. A local error often occurs inside a sentence; it only affects a single constituent in a sentence, but does not affect communication or create any processing problem. The other category is global error, which violates the overall structure of a sentence, thus it may bring more problems in understanding the meaning of the whole sentence. Errors such as wrong word order, surplus, and Chinglish are of this type. It might be surprising that these structure errors are not so frequently made as local errors in junior students' writing. The junior school students have not yet learnt complex sentences such as subordinate clause and tend to write simple sentences. This may explain the low rate of the occurrence of the errors of surplus, Chinglish, and wrong word order.
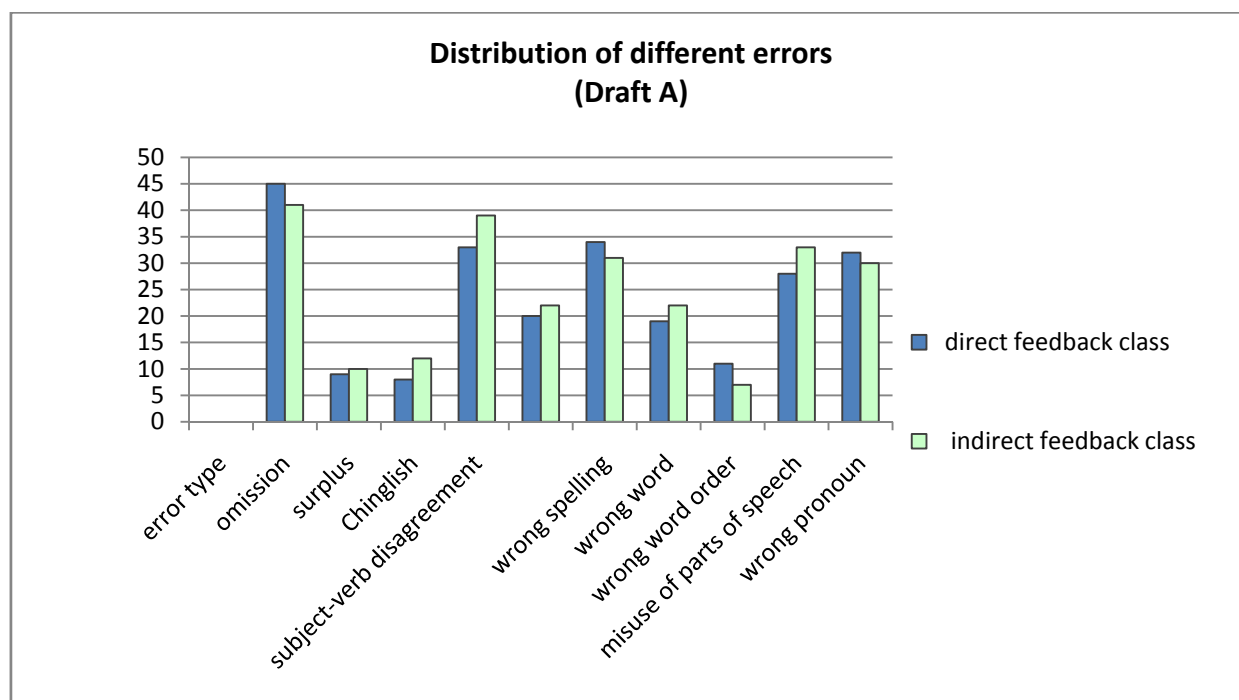

Figure 1. Distribution of errors from DFC and IFC.

Effects of WCF

So far we have found how errors are distributed in subjects' writing. To illustrate the effects of DF and IF, we designed two other charts: Figure 2 and Figure 3. Figure 2 demonstrates a contrast of error changes in the Draft Bs of the two classes. The quantity of the errors of wrong word and surplus expanded; subject-verb disagreement increased in DFC while decreased in IFC; the number of word order and pronoun errors dropped in DFC but went up in IFC. Chinglish expression reduced in IFC but stayed the same in DFC. The errors of misuse of parts of speech, wrong spelling, wrong plural and singular form, and omission cut their number in both classes. As for the total number of errors, both classes fell, but IFC dropped more.
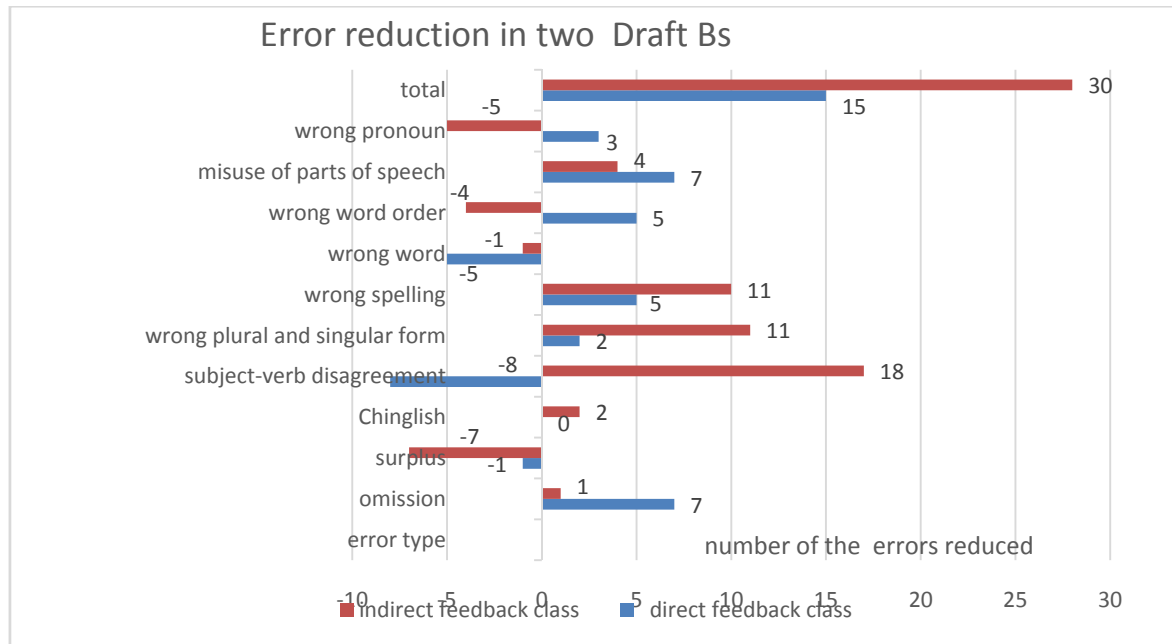

Figure 2. Error reduction in Draft Bs (in contrast with Draft As).

Figure 3 illustrates the difference in error changes in Draft Cs of the two classes. For both classes, Chinglish errors increased despite the fact that the compositions of both two classes had been corrected. The errors of wrong word increased in DFC while decreased in IFC. Students in DFC made new errors when they drafted a piece of writing; the errors of surplus, wrong word order, and wrong pronoun decreased in DFC but increased in IFC, which indicates that DF exerts greater influence on surplus, wrong word order, and wrong pronoun error correction. In addition, from the three drafts, we found that subjects in DFC tended to expand the content in the second draft, thus their Draft Bs were generally longer and new errors occurred. However, in their third drafts, most of them concentrated on the revision of errors and a great improvement could be seen.

Students in IFC tended to correct their errors rather than to modify the content. Therefore, their second drafts had fewer errors than those from the DFC. However, in the third drafts, IFC left behind DFC possibly due to their inadequacy of knowledge, lack of time, and other factors. In contrast, with the correct forms provided, the task of correcting errors for the subjects in DFC became much easier and that was why in the third drafts, DFC achieved a greater success than IFC.
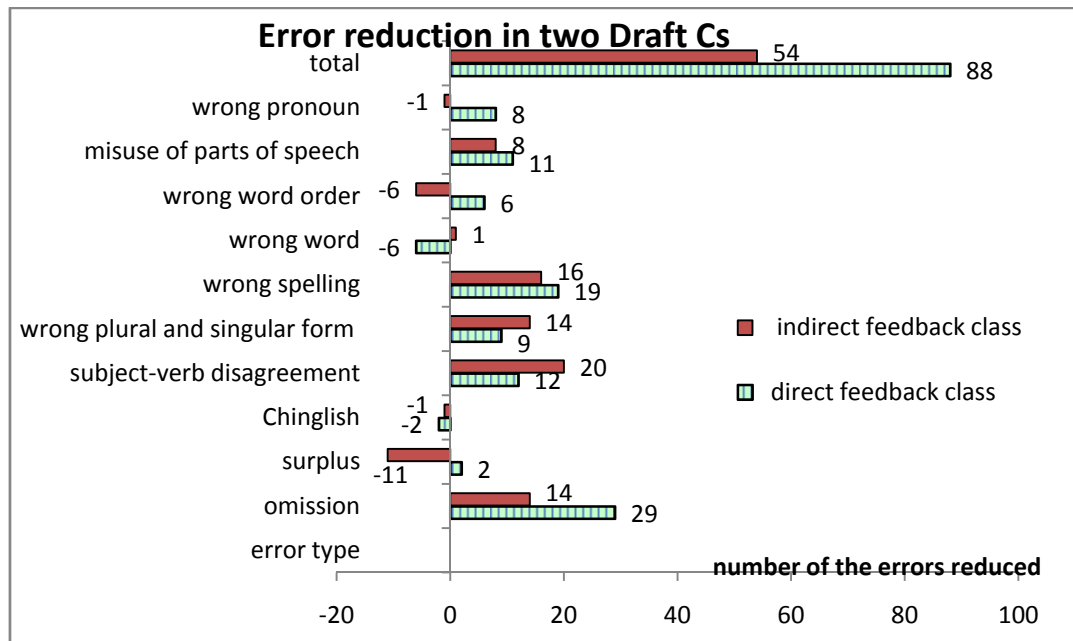
Figure 3. Error reduction in Draft C (in contrast with Draft A).

Discussion of the Results

Generally speaking, WCF proves to be helpful in improving accuracy in junior students' writing. IF appears to be more advantageous to error correction since students in IFC made fewer errors in Draft B than their counterparts in DFC. Unlike students in DFC who are devoted to expanding the contents, IFC students concentrate on error corrections with the help of the teacher's comments. Researchers have suggested that IF is generally preferable because it forces students to engage in "guided learning and problem-solving" (Lalande, 1982) and helps them build skills as "independent self-editors" (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993). This helps to explain why IFC performed better than DFC in draft Bs. However, in Draft Cs, DFC had a larger error reduction than IFC, because more attention again is focused on linguistic accuracy rather than contents.

As for the fact that both DF and IF do not help much with Chinglish expressions, the influence of L1 should be responsible. Students are influenced by their mother tongue and Chinese culture and tend to produce English in the Chinese manner. Sentences like "*The students all very like her*" and "*No thank you*" are common in their writing and speaking. This can be explained by compensation hypothesis, which states that in the absence of context compatible with L2 use, learners' deep-rooted L1-based contextual knowledge might be activated to compensate for the lack (WANG, 2003). When asked what was wrong with these unidiomatic expressions during the interview, many students still insisted that these sentences were correct, without knowing they were the result of L1 interference.

A crucial finding from the study is that DF exerts no effect on the correction of wrong words while indirect feedback plays a positive role. The reason might be that DF or explicit correction is not effective enough to draw students' attention to the error. But IF may better arouse students' attention to the wrong words used in their writing and they would reflect on the error and work out a substitution. For example, the erroneous use of the article such as "*a English book*" prevails in Chinese students' writing. Most students know the rule that the indefinite article "*an*" goes before a vowel, but they often neglect it when performing a communicative

task. In this case, IF reminds students of the error and causes more reflections. Another common error is the misuse of the conjunction "and", as in "*I often play basketball and my friend*". After DF, students simply changed "and" to "with" and had no idea about why they did this. The confusion about the difference between "and" and "with" still remained and the same error occurred again. To be much worse, we found that a couple of "conscientious" students changed all the "and's" to "with's" in their writing after they got the teacher's direct feedback. However, students receiving an indirect feedback would think of the error and tried hard to correct it, using their own implicit grammatical knowledge. In IFC, data showed that 90% of students who made "and" errors in this regard successfully changed them into "with". This testifies the claim that L2 learners have implicit knowledge in their minds. Several years of input has helped them establish grammar about when to use "and" (as a conjunction) and when to use "with" (as a preposition). But such rules have not been deeply-rooted in the system. It is often interfered by L1 system, because in Chinese language, "和" (and) serves the same function as "with" (as a preposition). So L2 English learners, especially beginners, are often confused by the difference. At this sensitive stage, indirect feedback works better because it requires more efforts and engagement on the part of the student writer.

In contrast, the errors of surplus, wrong word order, and wrong pronoun increase in IFC but decrease in DFC. Probably, these errors (largely global errors) are beyond students' abilities to revise by themselves because they involve complicated grammar. For example, "*I think dancing it is very boring*" is a popular type of error in their compositions. Student writers knew the subject-verb construction but they could not identify the "double subject" error in a sentence because they had not mastered the use of relevant clause yet. It has been suggested that students at lower levels of L2 proficiency may not have sufficient linguistic knowledge to self-correct errors even when they are pointed out (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004) and that a combination of DF and IF may be most helpful to students.

Based on the analysis above, both two types of corrective feedback are effective for students' writing improvement, but DF has more weight than IF. This is partly because of students' inadequate ability to correct their errors. Many of them were even unable to understand teacher's marks and comments. Another reason accounting for the result is energy and time distribution. Students in DFC were under less pressure in correcting errors when the right forms had been offered. However, those in indirect feedback class had to devote more time and energy to decoding teachers' comments and revising errors.

True, corrective feedback plays a positive role in improving written accuracy. However, DF boasts more asserts than IF in improving students' overall accuracy in writing. When it comes to some specific errors such as wrong word, IF is superior to DF. Therefore, it may be an advisable choice to combine the virtues of different types of feedback, for example, giving priority to DF and taking IF as a complement in the correction of some particular errors.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study has found that (1) In Chinese junior students' writing, omission, subject-verb disagreement, wrong spelling, misuse of parts of speech, and wrong pronoun were the most frequent errors; (2) Both DF and IF played positive roles in helping students to identify and correct local errors in draft-to-draft performance; (3) Corrective feedback did not help much in bringing down the number of global errors. Specifically, DF was almost helpless in eliminating errors of wrong words, but IF worked better since it could engage students in reflecting on their errors. For Chinglish and word order errors, however, IF's role was very

limited in revision and correction, due to students' inefficient syntactic knowledge. In contrast, for local errors, IF could be effective in eliciting students' effort or engagement in revision of their drafts. This is because when learners have realized the gap between their own production and the target form by themselves, they process the information more deeply than if the teacher leads them to it (Williams, 2007).

This study provides insightful implications for English teaching in China. The first is the necessity of explicit teaching of grammar, which can be an indispensable complement of the popular communicative language teaching approach. Certain amount of explicit instruction is necessary, especially when there is marked difference between English and Chinese syntactic structures. Second, large quantities of positive input must be guaranteed. This helps junior learners develop implicit knowledge of the language learned. They should be encouraged to memorize idiomatic chunks and idioms, because these expressions are loaded with cultural meanings and most of them cannot be analyzed grammatically. Positive input with the structures-to-be-taught in it also helps learners to acquire its usage in real context. Third, a combination of DF and IF should be provided for global and systematic errors that recur throughout students' compositions. Errors on the difference between "and" and "with" should be directly pointed out and explained by teachers.

Though many studies show that, in general, corrective feedback has a positive impact on second language acquisition and it seems that DF is the dominant one, controversies still exist about the effectiveness of WCF and which feedback method is more effective. Therefore, there is still a large room for future research to investigate what errors to feedback, when to offer feedback, and how to provide feedback on linguistic errors.

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