



## THE EFFECTS OF INDIRECT FEEDBACK ON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN EFL LEARNER WRITING

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of indirect feedback on learners' grammatical errors in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classes. It also considers students' attitudes towards indirect feedback. Fifty-six eleventh-grade students and one teacher-researcher participated in this empirical study. Three instruments used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data were pretest, posttest and delayed test on English writing as well as a questionnaire and individual interview on students' attitudes towards indirect feedback. The results showed that the students in the experimental condition committed many fewer grammatical errors than their counterparts in the control group when errors were treated as a single group. The results also indicated that indirect feedback helped reduce more error categories and more errors in each category, especially those related to the simple past tense. Moreover, the participants in the experimental group had positive attitudes toward indirect feedback. These findings support the claim that indirect feedback may help reduce grammatical errors in student writing.

**Keywords:** indirect feedback, grammatical errors, attitudes, error categories, writing

### 1. Introduction

English has been not only one of the most popular languages in the world but also the official language in international organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, and UNESCO (Crystal, 2003). In Vietnam, English has gradually become a dominant foreign language and has been considered as an important and official subject of the Vietnamese education system. The English textbooks and syllabus have been reformed with the emphasis on the development of all four language skills, especially speaking and writing (Hoang, 2007). However, according to Le (2008), only 6.9% of students wanted to learn writing. Furthermore, it was found that their writing includes many grammatical mistakes, which may result in students' negative attitudes toward writing in English as well as the low quality of their written texts. The lack of real writing skills in tests and

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exams and the influence of Confucianism on students' behaviors in the classrooms lead to the fact that teacher error feedback is, thus, less useful and that learners keep making the same errors in their writing and have negative attitudes toward writing in English.

According to British Council (2006), to improve students' grammatical accuracy in writing, teachers are supposed to offer students chances to respond to teacher feedback thoughtfully and critically. Teachers are also expected to assign tasks which create more writing practice without using valuable class time, having students do more revision as well as self-correct their own errors.

Numerous studies on the use of indirect feedback in writing classes have shown that indirect feedback can be applied in writing classes to solve the addressed issues (Ezzahouani, 2018; Lee, 2005; Liu, 2008; Kaweera, 2008; Rahmawati, 2017; Setyorini, 2015; Tan & Manochphiyo, 2017; Truong, 2004). Scholar literature reveals that little empirical research has been documented regarding the use of indirect feedback in English writing classes in Vietnamese high schools. Thus, examining the impact of indirect feedback on students' grammatical errors and their attitudes towards the use of indirect feedback in writing classes at a specialized high school is needed.

### 1.1 Research questions

The following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What are the effects of indirect feedback on grammatical errors in EFL students' writing?
- 2) What are students' attitudes toward indirect feedback in their writing classes?

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Grammatical errors

Grammatical errors have been defined differently by different researchers (Ellis, 1994, 1997; Tsui, 1995). In general terms, *error* simply refers to *mistake*. Ellis (1994) considers *error* as a deviation from the norms of the target language, particularly in language classroom settings. Ellis (1997) further clarifies that *error* refers to gaps in learner knowledge while *mistake* refers to occasional failures in performance because learners are unable to perform what they know. However, a clear distinction between an error or a mistake may not be possible since learners may consistently use a feature in some contexts and consistently fail to use it in other ones. Tsui (1995) defines an error as (1) something that is rejected by the teacher because it is wrong or inappropriate, (2) something that the teacher does not want, or (3) something that does not conform to the rules which the teacher lays down.

### 2.2 Error categories

Among many controversies in error correction is the number of error categories used to analyze grammatical accuracy in English writing. Errors have been divided into two basically broad types, including global and local errors (Ellis, 1997) or treatable and untreatable ones (Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Virtually all the published research

has provided corrective feedback on at least 12 error categories (Erel, 2007; Greenslade et al., 2006; Kaweera, 2008). According to these researchers, it is even more important that error categories should not be too broadly constituted since different domains of linguistic knowledge (and therefore different linguistic error categories) are acquired in different ways. Moreover, they suggest an intensive targeting of one or only a few detailed error categories at a time. Furthermore, the focus of correction must be on 'what is being taught or has been taught', rather than on every single deviation (Delgado, 2007; Hammerly, 1991; Truscott, 2001).

### **2.3 Indirect feedback**

Different scholars have defined the term *indirect feedback* differently in the literature. Lee (2004) states that direct or explicit feedback occurs when the teacher picks out errors and gives the correct forms (Ellis et al., 2008) whereas indirect correction refers to situations when the teacher marks those errors that have been made but does not supply the correct forms, requiring the learners to diagnose and correct their errors. Bitchener and his colleague (2005) further clarify that direct correction may consist of the crossing out of unnecessary words, inserting missing words or the provision of the correct form or structures while indirect feedback may be provided in such ways as underlining or circling the error, recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line or using a code to show where the error has occurred and what type of error it is. Instead of providing an explicit correction, teachers allow learners to resolve and correct the problem that has been drawn to their attention. Their definition of indirect corrections is the same as that of Gu enette (2007).

### **2.4 Strengths and weaknesses of indirect feedback**

Since indirect feedback or direct feedback has its own strengths and weaknesses, there has been a debate on which strategy is more effective in responding to errors in learners' written texts. Many researchers strongly argue for indirect correction because it helps learners become better editors and writers (Lee, 2004; Nelson, 2008; Truong, 2004). In contrast, other linguists are for direct correction since it is helpful to avoid confusion (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Kubota, 2001). However, Lee (1997) supports both as learners of different language proficiency need different feedback strategies (Al Harrasi, 2019).

### **2.5 Effects of indirect feedback on grammatical errors**

The direct and indirect feedback comparison can be informative and help further our understanding of the effectiveness of indirect feedback. Numerous comparative studies have been conducted with different results. In some studies, no significant differences were found between the direct correction group and the indirect correction one in terms of accuracy (Ahmadian et al., 2019; Frantzen, 1995; Valizadeh, 2020). Yet, some studies have indicated that indirect feedback significantly reduced learners' grammatical errors (Ezzahouani, 2018; Rahmawati, 2017; Tan & Manochphiyo, 2017; Westmacott, 2017). However, the others proved that direct correction helped enhance learners' grammatical

accuracy more than indirect feedback (Chandler, 2003; Kisananto, 2015; Lim & Renandya, 2020; Mohammad, 2015; Suh, 2014).

### **2.6 Vietnamese EFL learners' characteristics and attitudes toward indirect feedback**

Learners' characteristics and their attitudes toward indirect feedback should be considered since these factors can affect their learning. Many researchers agree that Vietnamese learners are likely to be passive recipients of knowledge and lack critical thinking because of the influence of Confucianism (Duong, 2001; Duong & Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen, 2005). Surveys of learners' attitudes and preferences toward the use of direct and indirect feedback have shown contrasting results. Many studies have shown that learner writers have positive attitudes toward indirect feedback (Lee, 2005; Setyorini, 2015; Truong, 2004). However, many other studies have indicated that learners' express preferences and positive attitudes toward direct correction (Chandler, 2003; Liu, 2008; Nguyen, 2009; Sheen, 2007).

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Design**

This research was an experimental study using a two-group pretest and posttest design. The implementation of indirect feedback (the independent variable) in the experimental group was monitored. Students' grammatical errors and their attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback (the dependent variables) were measured. The main purpose of the implementation of indirect feedback was to give students opportunities to reduce their grammatical errors in writing in English by self-correcting their errors underlined by the teacher.

For 14 weeks, the two groups were instructed equally and similarly in terms of instruction method, skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), and language focus by the teacher-researcher. However, the difference between the two groups was that teacher direct feedback (the traditional teacher feedback) on the students' written products was used in the control condition while teacher indirect feedback (underlining for student self-correction) was applied in the experimental group. In both cases, the teacher-researcher gave final judgments on students' written products.

### **3.2 Participants**

The participants involved in this study were 56 students who majored in mathematics and chemistry and learned Basic or General English. All of the participants were in grade 11 at a specialized high school in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Thus, they were supposed to be at the same level of English writing proficiency. Their median age was  $M = 17$ . Forty of the participants were male and sixteen of them were female.

The participants were arranged into two separate groups by the school. The teacher-researcher randomly chose one as a control group and the other as an experimental one. This method of the sample selection resulted in a representative and unbiased sample for the population. Moreover, 65 students at the same level of English

proficiency in three other classes helped pilot the questionnaires and the writing tests. Besides the teacher-researcher who was responsible for implementing indirect feedback and collecting as well as analyzing data, two other teachers of English were involved in this project to help measure the number of words and errors in the students' pretests (week 1), posttests (week 14) and delayed tests (week 21).

### **3.3 Instruments**

#### **3.3.1 Writing tests**

The pretest, the posttest and the delayed test on English writing are similar in format, instruction, length, level of difficulty, and allotted time. However, the specific writing topics among the three tests are different from each other but familiar to students. Thus, the participants had no trouble with topical knowledge. Before having been used officially, the pretest, the posttest and the delayed test were piloted to 65 participants who were of similar backgrounds and levels of English proficiency as those in the official study to ensure their reliability and validity.

#### **3.3.2 Questionnaire on students' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback**

The questionnaire aimed to measure the participants' attitudes toward indirect feedback used in their writing classes. The questionnaire was adapted from the original version of Ryan and Deci's (1992, 2000) Intrinsic Motivation Inventory. The questionnaire administered to the experimental group centered on investigating students' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback, which matched the aims of the study.

The questionnaire consists of 18 items in total, each of which includes a statement about students' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback followed by a five-point scale (strongly disagrees, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree). All these items are categorized into four clusters, including participants' interest and enjoyment towards indirect feedback (question items 1, 8, and 15); participants' pressure and tension when they dealt with indirect feedback (question items 5 and 11); the value and usefulness of indirect feedback on perceived competence and grammatical accuracy (question items 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17 and 18) and participants' attitudes toward learning English (question items 13 and 16). Before being officially used in the study, the 18-item questionnaire was piloted among 65 students with similar backgrounds and levels of English proficiency to test the reliability of the instrument. The reliability of the pilot questionnaire was Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) = .8679. The result shows that the questionnaire on students' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback was reliable and could be used for collecting the data of the official study.

#### **3.3.3 Interview on students' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback**

In order to have qualitative data on the students' attitudes toward indirect feedback, an interview was also carried out at the end of the treatment to gain more insight into the investigated phenomenon. Nine participants in the experimental group, including three with the highest grammatical accuracy, three with average grammatical accuracy, and three with the lowest grammatical accuracy, got involved in this interview. This method

of sample selection was intended to provide representatives of good, average, and weak students of the whole group. Each student was asked to answer four questions, as follows:

- 1) What do you think about indirect feedback used in your writing classes?
- 2) Were there any grammatical points you could not correct by yourself? What were they? Why couldn't you correct them?
- 3) What did you do in case you did not know how to correct the underlined mistakes by yourself?
- 4) Would you like to study in writing classes with teachers who use the same error treatment in the future? Why (not)?

### **3.4 Material**

The material used in this study was the main coursebook for EFL high school students in grade 11 - Tieng Anh 11. The students were instructed the first six writing lessons and one writing section in Test Yourself A in the book for practicing English writing.

### **3.5 Analysis**

Data were collected and categorized according to their types, overwriting tests, questionnaires and interviews. All quantitative data gained from writing tests and questionnaires were subjected to the Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16.0 for analysis. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed. All the participants' answers would be kept strictly confidential.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Reduction of grammatical errors from the writing tests**

The measurement of participants' grammatical errors in the pretest and posttest was based on that of Chandler (2003): all the errors were counted and calculated per 100 words (the total number of errors x 100 is divided by the total number of words in participants' writing) as the participants could not be expected to produce all the same length of written texts. Errors per 100 words were then subjected to SPSS for data analysis.

#### **4.1.1 Treating all errors as a single group**

The results from the pretest and the posttest on writing indicated that there was no significant difference in the number of grammatical errors in their counterparts' written texts in the direct feedback group whereas a significant reduction in the number of grammatical errors in the participants' written texts was found in the indirect feedback group. In other words, indirect feedback helped reduce students' grammatical errors significantly more.

**Table 4.1:** Means and standard deviations on errors  
per 100 words between the two groups before and after the study

Writing tests	Conditions	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	MD	SD
Pre-	Control	28	.00	6.15	2.71	.06	1.56
	Experimental	28	.54	10.06	2.65		2.11
Post-	Control	28	.68	7.88	2.48	1.31	1.53
	Experimental	28	.00	6.52	1.16		1.63

Table 4.1 shows that after the study the mean number of errors per 100 words in participants' writing of the experimental group ( $M = 1.16$ ) is much lower than that of the control group ( $M = 2.48$ ). The mean difference ( $MD = 1.31$ ) in participants' grammatical errors between the two conditions after the study is statistically significant ( $t = 3.11, df = 54, p = .003$ ). The result indicates that the post number (after the study) of participants' grammatical errors in writing in English between the two conditions is significantly different: the mean score of the experimental group is lower than that of the control group. The result supports the conclusion that after the study, the participants in the experimental condition made many fewer grammatical errors than their counterparts in the control condition.

#### 4.1.2 Treating errors as different error categories

The results from the pretest and posttest indicated that by the end of the study, there was a very slight decrease of different degrees in three out of five error categories among students in the control group whereas those in the experimental group could commit fewer errors in four out of five error types. However, the level of significance ( $p > .05$ ) showed no remarkable reduction in the number of five error types in the two groups before and after the study respectively, except for errors related to the simple past tense ( $p = .003$ ) in the indirect feedback condition. In other words, indirect feedback helped reduce more grammatical error categories and more errors in each category, especially those related to the simple past tense. Seven weeks after the writing posttest, a delayed test was used to check the long-term effectiveness of indirect feedback.

**Table 4.2:** The mean number of grammatical errors  
of the two groups from the writing posttest and delayed test

Groups	Writing tests	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	MD	SD
Control	Post-	28	.68	7.88	2.48	.61	1.53
	Delayed	28	.00	4.24	1.86		1.34
Experimental	Post-	28	.00	6.52	1.16	.42	1.63
	Delayed	28	.00	2.54	.74		.69

Table 4.2 indicates that participants' grammatical errors in the delayed tests of the two groups continued to decrease after the writing pretests and writing posttests. However, the participants in the experimental condition made fewer errors than those in the control one. This result proves that the implementation of indirect feedback has contributed to

reducing grammatical errors in the participants' written texts or improving their grammatical accuracy and prolonged stably the positive effect of the treatment as well.

## 4.2 Participants' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback

### 4.2.1 Answers from the questionnaire

**Table 4.3:** Participants' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback

Condition	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Experimental	28	2.94	4.61	3.68	.44

As presented in Table 4.3, the mean score of the questionnaire is high ( $M = 3.68$ ) in comparison with scale 3 in the five-point scale. This result reveals that the participants had positive attitudes toward indirect feedback used in their writing classes.

**Table 4.4:** Mean score of participants' attitudes and percentage in terms of questionnaire clusters

Clusters	Items	Min	Max	Mean (M)	SD	Percentage
Interest/Enjoyment	1, 8, 15	2.67	5.00	4.03	.70	80.71%
Tension/Anxiety	5, 11	2.00	5.00	3.57	.76	71.43%
Value/Usefulness of indirect feedback	2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 18	2.82	4.55	3.63	.45	72.79%
Attitudes toward learning English	13, 16	2.00	5.00	3.55	.77	70.36%

Table 4.4 shows that the mean scores of the four questionnaire clusters are high in comparison with scale 3 in the five-point scale.

#### a. Participants' interest and enjoyment

The result of the questionnaire showed that 80.71 % of the students in the experimental group agreed that indirect feedback held their attention, and it was an interesting learning activity.

#### b. Participants' pressure and tension

The result also indicated that 71.43 % of the students felt very relaxed when they were asked to self-correct the underlined errors.

#### c. Value and usefulness of indirect feedback

The result revealed that 72.79 % of the participants strongly agreed that indirect feedback was very useful and beneficial to them since it helped student writers become more competent and reduce grammatical errors in their subsequent writing.

#### d. Participants' attitudes toward learning English

The result of the study pointed out that 70.36 % of the students completely agreed that they became more responsible for their studies and spent more time on self-study thanks to indirect feedback.



#### **4.2.2 Answers from the interview**

##### **a. Participants' thoughts about indirect feedback used in their writing classes**

The individual interview on participants' attitudes toward indirect feedback revealed that students highly valued the importance of indirect feedback in the writing classes on answering the first question. They all agreed that indirect feedback was useful and effective since it helped improve their editing skills, reduce grammatical errors, and encourage learner-centered learning.

##### **b. Grammatical errors that participants could not correct by themselves**

Factors that might affect students' attitudes toward the use of indirect feedback were investigated through the second question. Errors related to irregular verbs, subject-verb agreement and verb missing are those that they had difficulty self-correcting. This result is in line with what the teacher-research had noted in the teaching log. However, they admitted not spending much time on English since their major was chemistry. They sometimes ignored other subjects to do tasks in their major, to join many extra curriculum activities, and to study advanced chemistry at school in the afternoon. They believed that if they had spent time studying English, they could have done their tasks better.

##### **c. Participants' solutions in case they did not know how to correct the underlined mistakes**

All the interviewees agreed that they became responsible for their own learning and developed learner autonomy thanks to indirect feedback when asked the third question. Actually, in case they did not know how to self-correct the underlined errors, they spent more time learning from friends, books, and other materials or even asking their teacher so that they could correct these errors with the best results.

##### **d. Participants' preferences for indirect feedback and the reasons for their preferences**

The last question revealed that eight out of nine students (88.9%) preferred indirect feedback and wanted to learn with the teacher who would use indirect feedback in the future. They thought that indirect feedback helped them respond to teacher feedback thoughtfully and critically, which resulted in the reduction in grammatical errors. In addition, they were proud of themselves when they could provide the correct forms for the underlined errors and make many fewer errors in their next written texts. Only one student (11.1%) said that he would trust the teacher as the teacher would be best able to judge the class level and choose the best method to help the students. Consequently, he would do whatever his teacher would ask him to do.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Reduction of grammatical errors in students' writing**

The results from the pretest and posttest on writing demonstrated a significant reduction in the number of grammatical errors in the participants' written texts in the indirect feedback group while there was no significant difference in the number of grammatical

errors in their counterparts' written texts in the direct feedback group. In other words, indirect feedback helped reduce students' grammatical errors significantly more. The results of this study are different from those of previous research by Ahmadian et al. (2019); Frantzen (1995) and Valizadeh (2020), who found no significant difference between direct correction and indirect correction in terms of grammatical accuracy. Moreover, these results are opposite to those of Chandler (2003); Kisananto (2015); Lim & Renandya (2020); Mohammad (2015) and Suh (2014), who showed that direct correction led to the greatest accuracy in comparison with different types of indirect feedback. However, these findings are consistent with those of Ezzahouani (2018); Rahmawati (2017); Tan & Manochphiyo (2017) and Westmacott (2017). Their research studies as well as this study reveal that grammatical errors in students' writing decreased significantly more after the experiment thanks to indirect feedback. One possible reason for the improvement in grammatical accuracy in students' writing could be students' consciousness-raising and self-correction. This discovery approach to error correction helped students make inferences, formulate concepts about the target language (Makino, 1993) and fix the information into their long-term memories (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). In particular, students spent time learning more from friends, books and other materials or even their teacher (Hammer, 1991) when they had difficulty correcting the underlined errors. In other words, self-correction enhanced students' critical thinking and self-studying (Makino, 1993), which helped them have a deeper understanding of the grammatical points, remember these points better and longer, and become more conscious of grammatical errors in their subsequent writing (Ellis, 1991; Ferris, 2004). Therefore, they were able to reduce the number of grammatical errors in their writing.

In terms of error categories, the results from the pretest and posttest indicated that by the end of the experiment, there was a very slight decrease of different degrees in three out of five error categories in the control group's written texts whereas the experimental group could commit fewer errors in four out of five error types. In other words, indirect feedback helped reduce more grammatical error categories and more errors in each category, especially those related to the simple past tense ( $p = .003$ ). What this seems to indicate is that the current findings reinforce the view of other researchers (Erel, 2007; Greenslade et al., 2006; Kaweera, 2008). Yet, one further issue of theoretical significance should be noted. In terms of second language acquisition, error categories should not be too broadly constituted since different domains of linguistic knowledge and therefore different linguistic error categories are acquired in different ways.

Finally, the delayed test to measure the stable effectiveness of indirect feedback revealed that students' grammatical errors in the two groups continued to decrease slightly. This could be explained that error feedback helped students notice the mismatch between their interlanguage and the target language, which might well facilitate second language acquisition. In fact, error feedback – a way to draw students' attention to the forms – helps them avoid fossilization and continue developing their linguistic competence. Thus, getting the teacher to correct or to underline for student self-correction led to a significant improvement in accuracy (Chandler, 2003) since they could reject the

wrong ones from certain sources as well as preclude types of overgeneration from becoming their interlanguage.

### **5.2 Students' attitudes toward indirect feedback**

The results of the questionnaire and the interview showed that most of the students in the experimental group were very interested in teacher indirect feedback. They felt very relaxed when asked to self-correct the underlined errors and they strongly agreed that indirect feedback was very useful and beneficial to them since they became more responsible for their study and spent more time on self-study. In other words, learner writers have positive attitudes toward indirect feedback. In comparison with the studies by Chandler (2003); Liu (2008); Nguyen (2009) and Sheen (2007), this study shows opposite results, which support the conclusions of other researchers (Lee, 2005; Setyorini, 2015 and Truong, 2004). One possible explanation was that with an appropriately intensive targeting of five error categories in the area the class had been working on, students could easily self-correct the underlined errors without much anxiety (Delgado, 2007; Erel, 2007; Greenslade et al., 2006; Kaweera, 2008; Truscott, 2001). Another possible explanation could be the students' recognition of their own progress in self-correction and grammatical accuracy, which could result in their beliefs in the effectiveness of indirect feedback. In fact, self-correction benefits students because their consciousness is raised by critically thinking and correcting their own errors. It is the combination of error awareness and problem-solving that helps students become better editors and writers (Lee, 2004; Nelson, 2008; Truong, 2004) since they have a chance of learning by doing.

## **6. Conclusions and implications**

The empirical study reveals that the participants in the experimental condition significantly reduced grammatical errors in their subsequent writing after the study while grammatical errors of those in the control group were slightly reduced. Indirect feedback helped reduce grammatical errors to a greater degree than direct feedback when all errors were treated as a single group. Indirect feedback also helped decrease more error categories and more errors in each type, especially those related to the simple past tense than direct feedback. Moreover, the participants in the experimental group had positive attitudes toward indirect feedback and preferred the teacher to use indirect feedback in writing classes.

Overall results of this study imply that using indirect feedback in EFL writing classes could be a fruitful and effective method to reduce grammatical errors of students at specialized high schools in the Vietnamese context. In addition to improving students' grammatical accuracy, indirect feedback could change students' beliefs that error correction was primarily the teacher's responsibility and help students become critical thinkers and active participants with the help of teacher cues rather than being passive recipients in EFL writing courses.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have no conflicts of interest, authorship, and disclosures in publication. They confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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