STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR ERROR CORRECTION IN WRITING CLASSES: THE CASE OF GRADE 9 EFL LEARNERS OF AZEZO SECONDARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This research was dedicated to investigate students' tendencies towards error correction in EFL classes of writing sessions through survey questionnaires. Hence, 50 EFL students of grade 9 at Azezo secondary school were selected using random sampling technique. The results revealed positive tendency for written error correction and showed a lot of mutual preferences among students. Students favored to get all their written errors marked and corrected by their teachers. Some students think that feedback provision is on the teachers' responsibilities. Besides, this paper revealed different theories and teaching methodologies related to error correction, the types of errors and the techniques of error correction, such as teacher correction, peer-correction or self-correction. Finally, the paper tries to insight possible implications based on the conclusion drawn.

Key words: preferences, error correction, corrective feedback

1. INTRODUCTION

Errors refer to the usage of linguistic items in a way that is unacceptable to native speakers because of unfitting usage or unfinished learning (Klassen, 1991). Starting from the 1990s, errors were regarded a vivacious part of the learning process. They are systematic and different from mistakes. From the time when analysis of error sources is a fundamental aspect in the study of errors committed by learners, a distinction between mistakes or lapses should be highly considered.

Therefore, foreign language learning does not occur at once, since it is considered a progressive process. Within the stages of this process, mistakes are expected to be made. It is taken for granted that accepting the fact that errors are inescapable part of the learning process is crucial for both teachers and students (Davies & Pearse, 2000). In fact errors could be dealt with as a sign of learning in second language acquisition. Due to students' errors, they can work hard to master concepts they have misunderstood and define exactly extra work they might require.

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Since foreign language error began to be taken into consideration as a requisite and naturalist approach of language learning, errors committed by learners. As a result, the possible responses to those errors have become of great importance to those who are interested in teaching and investigating these errors (Wang, 2010). Too much attention has been given by researchers to the value of feedback, strategies of conducting and receiving feedback in addition to the influence of feedback on students' written production (Lee, 2005).

Having known these preferences and attitudes is substantial in teaching and learning process. Distinction between styles of learning with learners affect the learning environment by either providing or prohibiting their intentional awareness and active engagement (Katayama, 2007). This stems from the fact that learners are expected to be highly motivated in doing things that they prefer. Based on that, it is needful to recognize that learners have different attitudes and preferences, i.e., styles in the way they like to be corrected. For instance, some students prefer a focus on form, while others do not. Teaching methods also vary. Some instructors have a tendency for all errors to be corrected whereas some desire to be lenient and still some others leave the errors uncorrected (Noora, 2006).

2. BACKGROUND

Many years ago, Touchie stated that "language learning, like any kind of human learning, involves committing errors' (1986: 75). The treatment of these errors in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom has been a matter of concern for some years. Its importance emerged with the rise of learner-centered approaches to writing instruction in first language composition classes in the 1970s (Hyland and Hyland 2006). Ferris admits that "it is unrealistic to expect that EFL writers' production will be error free" (2002: 5) and she claims that errors in the second language classroom should be treated. In the late 70s, Hendrickson (1978) set forth that learners were not always able to identify their own mistakes and thus they needed a more expert source to help them find those mistakes. About thirty years later, Zacharias (2007) explained that most students firmly took for granted that teacher feedback was a keystone to improve their writings as they assumed teachers were more competent in terms of linguistic knowledge.
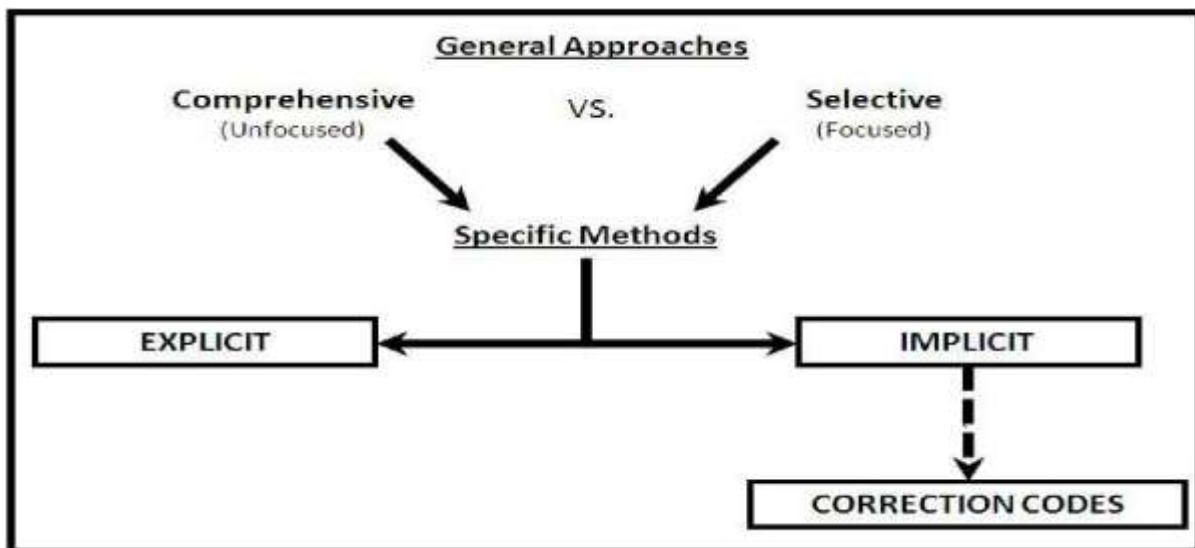
Authors like Dulay and Burt (1974) regarded error making as inevitable and necessary to language learning. It is even considered a symptom to show that the learner is in the developmental process of learning and internalizing the rules of the target language. As Alavi and Kaivanpanah put it "providing language learners with clear feedback plays a crucial role in developing learners' language abilities and helping them direct their learning" (2007: 181). Similarly, Zacharias (2007) enhances the importance of written feedback by suggesting that providing feedback can be a way to help students improve the quality of their writing and increase their motivation in such practice. However, Touchie (1986) considers that teachers should not correct all students' errors since it could be disruptive in their learning process and discourage them from communicating. He agrees on correcting errors which

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interfere with the understanding of the message and affect communication. Besides, this author maintained that errors occurring frequently and affecting a large number of students must be corrected over less frequent errors and those affecting few students in the classroom.

Contrary to many researchers on SLA, Truscott (1996) defined corrective feedback as ineffective and harmful for learners. This author pointed out students' unwillingness to change their intuitions and adopt their teachers' correction. He claimed that they either continued writing as they had done before or avoided the conflictive word or structure in following writings, adopting a negative or passive attitude towards teachers' corrections. By the same token, Lee claimed that "to date there is no research evidence to show that more error feedback would lead to better or faster development of grammatical accuracy in writing" (2003: 156). Nevertheless, the great majority of research on error correction suggests that it should take place in SLA classrooms. Moreover, studies measuring students' improvement from a longitudinal approach prove that students receiving feedback on errors over a period of time can improve their language accuracy (Ferris 2002).

In line with this, although the provision of correct forms of grammatical errors is one the most prevalent modes used by lots of instructors (Hendrickson, 1980), employing a number of kinds of corrective feedback has been proposed as it is regarded to be efficacious and felicitous than artlessly depending on an individual strategy. By the same token, investigators have recognized a couple of wide-ranging approaches and a couple of particular methods of written error correction.

Figure1: General Approaches and Specific Methods of Written Error Correction

Methods of Written Error Correction adapted from (Ellis, 2009)

In accordance with latest literature (Ellis, 2009 & Van Beuningen, 2010), there is a couple of general approaches used in providing written error correction. These two confronting approaches bring up the inclusiveness of written error correction delivered by instructors on their learners' written tasks. The overall (or unfocused) approach includes the instructors' correcting the whole errors in a students' paper, regardless the classification of their errors. Alternatively, the choosy (or focused) method aims at concentrating on particular linguistics items merely, neglecting all the remaining errors apart of the present focus domain uncorrected.

Varied expectations have been sorted out concerning the efficacy of the two approaches. The comprehensive approach could be relevant to Schmidt's (1994) noticing hypothesis, as formerly debated, in that the correction of all the writing errors in a learners' text may enhance lots of noticing on the learners' benefit by treating a large spectrum of errors. In other words, a comprehensive approach in written error correction might steer the awareness of the learner not only towards errors in the writing, but also to unprecedented aspects of the target language herewith enhancing more dynamic language learning.

Nonetheless, Ellis et al. (2006) debate that a comprehensive approach to provide written error correction might not be the most functional approach owing to the confined processing capability that EFL learners have. It was asserted by them that asking EFL learners to tackle written error correction that covers a large spectrum of linguistic aspects simultaneously may direct to a perceptive overload that might ban the learners from handling the feedback they received. The selective approach can be attributed to Pienemann's (1984) Teachability hypothesis, as formerly stated, in that EFL learners have the ability to efficiently learn new aspects of the target language only when they are in a complete readiness for it. Moreover, Ellis avers that a selective approach in written error correction may confirm more dynamic as EFL learners are capable of inspect numerous corrections of a single error. Under those circumstances, learners might not only get a more affluent comprehension as to why and what they wrote inaccurate, but also opportunities to absorb the accurate form.

Whether one approach is more efficient than the other still requires additional exploration because so far, it seems that there are no researches comparing the particular effects of comprehensive and selective approaches in written error correction. The subsequent part will talk over the two particular methods in providing written error correction.

Explicit error correction (also known as direct or obvious error correction) is the kind of feedback in which the EFL learners provide the accurate forms or structures in a straight line to overtly reveal the error in the linguistic structure of the learners' written task (Ferris, 2003). On the contrary, implicit error correction is known as the kind of feedback in which the EFL tutor basically displays that an error has been done through. This could be offered through numerous ways such as underlining, marginal clarification, encircling, or correction codes referring to specific grammatical errors.

In line with Hyland (1990), error correction codes make it easy to language teachers to give implicit feedback, and minimize undesirable and discouraging effects if demonstrating writing errors without decreasing the effects of error correction. This is pertinent to language instructors, who are very duteous with accurateness, the output of which is the learners' writings are often timed marked with red ink (Harmer, 1991). Nevertheless, with error correction codes, language instructors can basically define the kind and place of errors. Moreover, utilizing of error correction codes permits tutors to signspot pedagogical points that have actually been taught to the EFL Learners.

By talking over the various kinds of written error correction, it can be concluded that each strategy of giving feedback (whether implicit or explicit) has its merits and demerits. Thus, this paper tried to survey grade 9 EFL students' preferences for error correction in writing classes at Azezo secondary school.

3. PROBLEMS

Error correction has different forms and it can be spoken or scripted. Error correction is termed as the method of offering obvious, overwhelming, and reliable corrective feedback on a learners' grammatical errors in an attempt to developing the learners' capability to write perfectly (Ferris, 2002). It can be disputed that the provision of error correction is crucial owing to its significant role in leading, stimulating, and inspiring learners to improve their accuracy in EFL writing (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982).

Depending on the available literature review on teachers' and students' preferences and attitudes for correcting errors, a lot of studies reveal that while teachers and students share such viewpoints as the necessity of error correction and the items of errors that are required to be corrected, there are some discrepancies toward the strategies of error correction (Lee, 2005 & Wang, 2010). For instance, students desire all errors to be corrected thoroughly, whereas teachers do not. The findings of (Noora, 2006) claim that FL students favored focus on form style, but some discrepancies appeared in teachers' beliefs.

Correspondingly, a mutual benefit could occur from discovering the students' and teachers preferences in instructional practices. Wang (2010) proposed that "teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what and how they want to learn" (p.140). Leki (1991) also avers that an awareness of students' learning styles will enable teachers to use appropriate techniques and methods that are expected to be convenient to the students' preferences. Above all, matching the learning styles of students in a class and the teaching style of the teachers would help ameliorate students' learning, attitudes, behavior, and motivation (Ferris, 2003). Subsequently, it is worthy to detect the ways via which students favor to be corrected.

In spite of the fact that teachers and learners have recognized that written error correction plays a decisive role in developing EFL writing accuracy (Brown, 2001; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 2004), an argument concerning its efficiency has appeared in the previous decade (Chandler, 2003). Some of the studies such as (Kepner, 1991; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) revealed some findings which claim that error correction is not only unproductive, but also theoretically prejudicial to EFL writing. However, outcomes from other studies (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005) revealed that error correction is effectual and supportive in the advance and enhancement of students' EFL writing accurateness. This division will debate the negative and positive perceptions of written error correction.

Teachers' preferences are significant items that affect teacher favored ways for error correction. In line with (Borg, 2001), teacher beliefs is termed as a set of consciously and unconsciously saved suggestions that are responded as a reaction and a plan to the teachers' views and performances.

One of the most prominent researches in teachers' preferences was administered by Lee (2005) mentioning about ten gaps between teachers' preferences and written error correction practice. Lee asserts on the results from a study that explored the teachers' preferences in written feedback from a couple of sources: (1) feedback analysis on the basis of written texts collected from teachers in some continuation interviews and (2) a survey including a questionnaire directed to teachers along with interviews. Subsequently, feedback is considered a crucial task for teachers; she managed to provoke the beliefs that trigger teachers' practices so as to aid detect the aspects that lead to efficient feedback. The core result of her study is that while the teachers' inclination to check and identify the spots of errors for learners, they have a strong perception that the teacher feedback is the most desirable way for them to learn to correct and locate their own errors. This shows a discrepancy between the teachers' preferences supposing that teachers' written error correction activities may not permit learners to learn the proper way to correct and identify their own errors, even though they think that it does.

This study, thus, focuses on students' preferences for error correction since these attitudes have a great influence on the whole learning process. Therefore, the study investigated the case of grade 9 EFL students' preferences of error corrections in EFL writing at Azezo Secondary school, and attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the preferences of EFL students for error corrections in EFL writing classes?
2. What strategies do EFL students prefer to get their writing errors corrected by their teachers in EFL writing classes?
3. What EFL students consider are important features of their writing in need of attention by their teachers in EFL writing classes?

4. RESEARCH METHODS

As noted earlier, this research article was devoted to investigate the preferences of EFL students of error corrections in   EFL writing classes. Therefore, the researcher employed a quantitative study to survey which error corrections preferences better to be utilized in their EFL classes.

4.1. Participants, Sight and Sampling Techniques

EFL students of Azezo secondary school, which is found in Gondar city administration, were selected as participants. The study employed both random and available sampling techniques to choose the school and the research participants respectively.

4.2. Data Gathering Instruments and Procedures

This survey is designed to provoke direct judgments, straightforward statements, and easy questions. It comprises a variety of options: *agree*, *disagree*, and *I do not know* tags. The questionnaire statements extracted from instruments used in previous studies (Hyland, 2003 & Lee, 2005). The participants responded to the written statements, and elicit reactions, preferences and attitudes for error corrections. Thus, the questionnaires were administered to the EFL students, and collected after an hour.

4.3. Method of Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis process consisted quantitative methods. The data that was collected through questionnaires as quantitative tool was analyzed using tabulations, frequency counts and percentage.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section consists of presenting the results and discussions of the data surveyed via questionnaires, which focuses about the preference of students in terms of error corrections given by their teachers in learning writing skills. Therefore, the discussions targeted on: *proper time to give feedback, the amount of written correction, the subject who does the correction, forms of paper-marking technique, focus of the feedback, and types of feedback that the teachers employed.*

Table 1: Proper time to give feedback

No.	I would like my teacher to give me feedback at:	1	%	2	%	3	%
1	the prewriting stage	25	50	10	20	15	30
2	the drafting stage	14	28	26	52	10	20
3	the revising stage	32	64	11	22	7	14
4	the evaluation stage	34	68	7	14	9	18

1= agree, 2= disagree, 3= I do not know

As to the above table, regarding to the stage of writing, 64% of the students would like their teacher to give them feedback at the revising stage, and 68% of them are interested in having feedback at the evaluation stage. Besides, half of the learners are fond of having feedback at the prewriting stage. However, getting feedback at the drafting stage is less important for students in their ideas.

From this, one can deduce that the most preferred option for the students was giving feedback at the evaluation stage. Thus, acquainted with students preference in terms of stages of writing plays crucial role in helping them stand corrected and improve their writing skills. This seems the reason Schulz (1996) states that by knowing students' attitudes towards error correction teachers can adapt to the learners' needs and preferences, a fact which may influence the effectiveness of teachers' feedback.

Table 2: The amount of teacher written correction

No.	It would be better if my teacher:	1	%	2	%	3	%
5	corrects all the errors	36	72	11	22	3	6
6	selects some errors	20	40	28	56	2	4
7	doesn't correct any error	6	12	35	70	9	18

1= agree, 2= disagree, 3= I do not know

As shown in the above table, most of the students (72%) thought that they should have all their errors corrected, 40% of them asserted on the selection of a few errors, and 12% desired all the errors to be left without correction. In line with the previous researchers (Lee, 2005) 75% of the students in the current study favored their errors to be corrected as a whole to be understood to them. With regardless

of this discussion the researcher can conclude that correcting all the errors encourage students to create a good environment for their learning of writing skills.

Table 3: Who will do the correction?

No.	Whom do you think should correct your errors?	1	%	2	%	3	%
8	the teacher	34	68	10	20	6	12
9	your peers	15	30	26	52	9	18
10	You yourself	35	70	10	20	5	10

1= agree, 2= disagree, 3= I do not know

With regardless of the above table, students (68%) gave a great attention to get the errors corrected by the teacher. They thought that correcting errors by teachers is trustworthy and supportive. The findings were similar to (Hajian et al., 2014) also were in accordance with Radecki and Swales (1988), a lot of students favor to get their errors corrected by teachers because they thought that it is their teachers' responsibilities. The reason behind that is the students feel comfortable when the errors are corrected by teachers. 30% of them agree to get some correction from their peers. That was in compliance with Oladejo (1993) that students could be terrified to get unpleasant feedback from their peers, so peer correction was unaccepted by 52% of the students. Most of the students (70%) liked to correct the errors themselves, which is in line with the finding of the study conducted by Diab (2005). Hence, it is possible to deduce that students are most likely encouraged to correct their errors by themselves.

Table 4: Forms of paper-marking techniques

No.	The teacher should correct your errors by:	1	%	2	%	3	%
11	writing questions	31	62	11	55	8	16
12	writing statement	33	66	12	24	5	10
13	underlining the error and write comments at the end of the essay	35	70	12	24	3	6
14	using imperatives	15	30	33	66	2	4
15	using exclamations	32	64	11	22	7	14
16	crossing out the error and writing in the correct word or structure	32	64	13	26	5	10

| 17 | using correction codes | 31 | 62 | 15 | 30 | 4 | 8 | **1=** |

agree, 2= disagree, 3= I do not know

The above table indicates that statements 12 and 13 of the items showed high percentage of agreement by students (66%) and (70%) respectively. Therefore, students favored that their teachers comprehend their errors and support them with the proper comments at the end of the written work and preferred to the teachers to write statement (Hajian et al., 2014). Afterwards, statement 15 and 16 has been selected by (64%) students to have paper-marking strategy by using exclamations and crossing out the error and writing in the correct word or structure. In the same way, statement 11 and 17 shows the same percentage (62%) by the learners to have paper-marking strategy by writing questions and using correction codes respectively. In contrast, 66% of the students don't prefer to have paper-marking strategy using imperatives.
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Table 5: Focus on feedback

No.	In correcting errors, your teacher focus on:	1	%	2	%	3	%
18	Grammar	40	80	7	14	3	6
19	mechanics (e.g. punctuation, spelling, etc.)	38	76	10	20	2	4
20	vocabulary choice	36	72	11	22	3	6
21	Content	40	80	8	16	2	4
22	organization and paragraph construction	30	60	19	38	1	2

1= agree, 2= disagree, 3= I do not know

As shown in the above table, the results of the fifth statements are almost close to each other and ranged from 60% to 82%. As a matter of fact, in correcting errors, 80% of the students would like their teachers to focus on grammar and content. Some other students, i.e., 76%, 72% and 60% insist their teacher to focus on mechanics, vocabulary choice and organization and paragraph construction in giving feedback respectively. As a result, one can conclude that all the statements listed in the table should be focused by their teachers in correcting their errors committed in learning writing skills. Previous studies showed that students favored to get teachers' comments on grammatical, lexical, and

mechanics items, more than those on the content and construction (Halimi, 2008). It might cause conflicting findings even if it is conducted by the same subjects. For example in the finding of (Diab, 2005) inquiring about these aspects from students by three tables (6 items and 18 sub-items), firstly most of them agreed to point out errors in grammar by teachers in both first draft and final draft (86%) agreed with the first draft and 82% were in line with the final draft), but in item 6, grammar was given as one of the minimal percentages in students' responses and it was just more than spelling and punctuation (Diab, 2005).

Table 6: Types of feedback

1= agree, 2= disagree, 3= I do not know

No.	The teacher should give:	1	%	2	%	3	%
23	general comments	29	58	16	32	5	10
24	detailed and specific comments	35	70	9	18	4	8
25	positive comments	38	76	9	18	3	6
26	negative comments	12	24	37	74	1	2
27	direct feedback	35	70	5	10	10	20
28	indirect feedback	4	8	34	68	12	24
29	margin feedback	36	72	5	10	9	18
30	end feedback	38	76	6	12	6	12

As indicated in the table, 70% of students were attracted to get detailed and direct feedback from their teachers. Moreover, 76 % of them show that positive, and end feedback motivates students to better writing. Besides, 58% and 72% of them preferred to be given general comments, and margin feedback. On the contrary, 24 and 8% of the learners are discouraged if their teachers give them negative and indirect feedback respectively. Hamouda (2011) thought that detailed and specific feedback is more efficient than the general feedback to suggest feedback more clearly. On the other hand, Wang (2010) asserts that direct comments my enhance students' enthusiasm and self-awareness to correct their errors. Based on the above statements, we can deduce that students were thought to like general comments to be motivated and encouraged to detect the errors and correct them; margin feedback might be useful to the students, the information on the margin will lead the students to fix their errors; the importance of end feedback stems from the necessity to come to a conclusion and comprehension of the structure and its application.

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6. CONCLUSIONS

The finding of the study sheds some light on the issue of feedback and focuses on the appropriate time to provide it rather than who is responsible for this task, whether the teacher or the peers. This tells us that students need to have every error correction completely and fully revised by teachers. It is, therefore, deduced that adopting the suitable ways for error correction and employing them in the EFL writing classes will help to enhance the students' language proficiency. Besides, it must be said that investigating the preferences of error correction is of great importance for the teachers and students. In fact, the diversity of these preferences will help the learners and teachers get rid of the boredom of traditional writing classes. Students are very dependent on their teachers for correcting errors, because they trust their teachers.

7. IMPLICATIONS

According to the conclusion drawn, it seems crucial to teachers to have training programs on the various strategies related for correcting errors. In additions, the preferences for error correction for both teachers and students should be applied. Not only this, but also EFL teachers should make groups of homogeneous students to work with each other. This refers to that error correction as a task should be shared between teachers and their students. At last, feedback sessions should be conducted at the appropriate time for students and teachers for saving time, effort, and in order for effective learning to take place. Finally, further studies should be conducted to examine *"the influence of peer correction on the efficacy of students' writing."*

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