

A Phenomenological Study of Writing Error Correction: Perspectives of an English Language Learner in Two Different Contexts

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Abstract

In second language writing, student errors in grammatical structure, word choice, or idea expression are a common phenomenon. How these errors should be treated poses a challenging question. In this qualitative study I attempt to explore the impacts of some current methods of error correction in second language writing through a phenomenological study of an English language learners who studied in Vietnam and the United States. The study participant was invited to reflect his learning experiences in an interview with the researcher. Theme-based analysis of the interview revealed that the manner in which teachers correct errors can have a considerable impact on student motivation to improve second language writing. The study participant indicated that over-correction of language errors inhibited his motivation to write in second language and that language teachers may consider providing an adequate amount of correction and feedback. Pedagogical recommendations are made to help teachers make appropriate corrections for their students' writing papers.

Keywords: second language writing, error correction, theme analysis

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1. Introduction

Depending on perspective and experience, classroom teachers may correct student writing errors in different ways (e.g., immediate and delayed error correction). In this qualitative study, we attempt to explore the lived experiences of a language learner who has studied English in two different contexts. Through the qualitative analysis of his interview, we examine his experience in depth and suggest some teaching practices.

2. Literature Review

When grading students' papers, some teachers prefer to correct all errors, including minimal ones involving articles, morphemes to indicate singular and plural nouns, punctuation, and so forth. These teachers may advocate for the behavioristic or audio-lingual approach in language teaching that attempt to eliminate all errors in the learning process, since errors are believed to lead to the formation of bad habits (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). They may hold the view that student language proficiency will improve if the students receive immediate and direct feedback for any errors. Unfortunately, as Pehrsson and Robinson (1985) demonstrated, the over-correction of errors may have a negative impact on the relationship between teachers and students and erode learner motivation in reading and writing. This does not mean however, that student errors should be neglected; today, both students and teachers still acknowledge the effectiveness of error correction (Elham & Mohammad, 2014).

The Nature of Errors in SLA

It is important that language teachers have a solid understanding of the nature of errors in their students' second language acquisition. Doff (1988) maintained that language is a system of rules that learners have to acquire, and that making errors in language acquisition is a natural and unavoidable part of this process. Nunan (2001) later agreed that errors should not be considered as evidence of pathology on the part of the learners but as a normal and healthy part of the learning process. In addition, Littlewood (1998) believed that learner errors need not be seen as evidence of failure; on the contrary, errors are the clearest evidence for the learners' developing systems. These scholars attempted to prove that errors are not detrimental to the language learning process.

Why Students Make Errors in Their Writing

Some experts in SLA also try to point out reasons for making errors. First, many researchers have conducted contrastive analysis, namely the comparison between mother tongue (L1) and target language (L2). Drawing from such analysis, Nunan (2001) stated that errors are likely to occur as the result of the conflict between first and second language. An example of using *although* together with *but* illustrates this point. Some Vietnamese students tend to unconsciously use *although* followed by *but*. This is due not to the failure of the students to learn

but to the interference between the Vietnamese and English languages. Second, hypothesis formation should also be taken into consideration when errors are corrected. Ellis (1999) considered simplification as one of the strategies used to form hypotheses. Within simplification there are two other strategies: They include a process called *transfer*, which involves the use of learners' L1 as a basis for forming hypotheses about the L2, and *overgeneralization*, which involves the use of existing L2 knowledge by extending it to a new inter-language form. To clarify this point, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) posited that certain errors are caused by learners' failure to observe the boundaries of rules, which are classified as overgeneralization. Similarly, Ellis (1999) believed that learning does not only involve the formation of correct hypotheses, it also involves interim hypotheses that are systematically amended until the correct hypotheses are achieved.

To strengthen other scholars' arguments for the hypothesis formation in second language acquisition, Brown (2000) firmly maintained that *transfer* is a general term describing the carryover of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning and *overgeneralization* is the incorrect application—*negative transfer*—of previously learned second language material to a second language context. Overall, these authors have shown that learners make errors in second language acquisition for a variety of reasons, one of which can be the impact of their mother tongue on the L2, such as transferring rules from L1, or processing of L2 input using their own SLA strategies.

Some Effects of Correcting Student Errors

Even though errors are unavoidable in the language learning process, teachers cannot leave students free to make errors. Ellis (1997) suggested some reasons why teachers should give more attention to errors. First, it is useful for teachers to know what errors learners make. Second, it is possible that making errors may actually help learners to learn; however, students need teacher feedback before attempting to self-correct the errors they make. Doff (1988) strongly believed that while it is necessary to correct some errors, not all should be corrected.

Previous studies provided further evidence that language teachers need to be careful when correcting errors, otherwise it may lead to ill effects. Ellis (1999) reminded that the provision of negative feedback does not appear to lead to more accurate performance. In addition, Karra (2006) listed some negative sequences of immediate corrections, including anxiety, fear of making an error, the development of avoidance strategies, reduced motivation for participation in the classroom, lack of interest for learning, reduced will for self-correction, and lack of trust toward the teacher. Hence, it can be argued that a teacher's lack of awareness on how to appropriately correct student error may risk making students reluctant to use L2 in writing activities.

Student Preference for Corrective Feedback

Although errors are considered to be a natural process of second language acquisition and too much correction may lead to negative sequences, it does not mean that language teachers should ignore student errors. Students still want and expect feedback from their teachers (Ferris, 1995), and almost no student said they did not want errors corrected by their teacher (Ferris and Roberts, 2001). Enginarlar (1993) surveyed the attitudes of 47 college freshmen on two modes of feedback employed by two instructors: one was coded feedback and the other was content feedback. The result was an overwhelming majority (98%) reporting their support of feedback. From the study, students believed effective feedback should encompass attention to grammatical errors, guidance on writing skills, and comments on content. Kasanga (2001) demonstrated that feedback provided by the teacher is still highly valued by the student writers.

Some recent studies still reveal student preference for feedback and correction from teachers. For instance, Amrhein and Nassaji (2012) examined ESL students' and teachers' attitudes toward corrective feedback. The result of this study showed that students still find it useful to receive corrective feedback from their teachers. When taking part in the study, they expressed their disapproval of receiving little correction from their teachers. Ayhan and Fatma (2015) had similar findings in their study of EFL Turkish students. The analysis demonstrated that most of the participants had positive attitudes toward their teachers' feedback.

3. Methodology

Given that not all writing errors should be corrected, and the way in which errors are corrected will affect language learning, it is worth considering the student perspectives when receiving corrections from teachers. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What impacts do error correction methods have on an English language learner?

RQ2. What strategies can be implemented by classroom teachers when addressing writing errors?

To answer these questions, the researcher chose a participant with a history of student/teacher interactions with regards to L2 writing and error correction. Through the interview, the participant was able to share a narrative of his learning experiences. The qualitative approach will then enable the researcher to interpret the data within a given context.

Phenomenology

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the different effects of error correction methods through the lived experiences of an English language learner. As Moustakas (1994) stated, the evidence from phenomenological research is taken from the lived experiences of participants. To illuminate this point, Hatch (2002) posited that a phenomenological study attempts to describe the meaning of individuals' lived experiences and examine their important qualities. Creswell (2009) also maintained that a phenomenological study does look for the meaning in the experiences of the participants.

Research Design

This phenomenological study is conducted through an interview with an English language learner who has experience writing English in different contexts. The participant was known to the researcher and received an invitation email to take part in the study.

The in-depth interview lasted for about one hour and was conducted at a southeastern university in the U.S. The purpose of the interview was to gain insights into the participant's lived experiences. The researcher asked open-ended questions to understand the participant's opinions of different error correction methods in language writing. The interview was recorded with permission and transcribed by the researcher.

The data analysis follows the Creswell's (1994) systemic process and includes the following steps:

1. Reading through the whole interview transcription and coming up with an overall theme.
2. Re-reading the whole transcript and coming up with different topics and sub-topics.
3. Developing codes for each topic and assigning codes for each segment of the interview transcript.
4. Putting coded segments into related groups and naming each group with descriptive words.
5. Conducting data analysis based on these groups.

Because there was only one interview transcript in this study, no qualitative analysis software was needed. The analysis of the data serves as the basis for some implications and recommendations.

The Participant

Regarding the selection of participants for a qualitative study, Creswell (2009) suggested that those who have had experience in the phenomenon should be investigated. In this study, the participant was chosen for his breadth of experiences with error corrections in language writing. The participant in this study was given a pseudonym to protect his identity.

Andy, who is the participant in this study, is a master's student at a southeastern university in the U.S. He comes from Vietnam and completed his primary education and undergraduate studies in his home country. Andy began his U.S. education in 2015. He started learning English in Vietnam, but after entering the U.S.—due to his limited English language proficiency—Andy had to take a pathway program at a language institute for one year prior to taking courses as a degree-seeking student.

Andy's experience in writing English started in Vietnam and has continued in the U.S. His writing errors were treated differently in each context. During the interview, he shared his learning experiences and perspectives on how errors should be corrected.

4. Results

Codes and Themes

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of a student's lived experiences to investigate the effects of some common error correction methods. Ten codes emerged from the interview transcript, including:

Language learning location	Personal feelings	Error correction methods	Effects of correcting errors	Student activities
Teacher support	English tests	Learning experiences	Classroom interactions	Motivation

Four themes emerged from these codes and were analyzed in more detail to see the effects of different error correction methods. These themes include

- The way writing activities are delivered varies among different contexts.
- How much correction is adequate?
- The effects of two different error correction methods.
- Individual help sessions are necessary for error correction.

The analysis of these themes is based on the words of the participant to gain an insight into his lived experiences. Detailed analysis for each theme is as follows.

The way writing activities are delivered varies among different contexts.

Andy practiced writing in two contexts, first in his home country and subsequently in the U.S. In both contexts, he had to practice writing English as a required subject. In his home country compulsory writing activities were a

part of the national language curriculum. In the U.S. writing activities were included in language courses in the pathway program, a requirement for his full admission to the master's in business management program.

In terms of the interactions in writing activities, Andy felt that writing lessons in his home country were boring and that he had few interactions with his teachers. He explained that, although writing activities were included in the national language curriculum, the final exam did not include this skill. In the U.S., however, he had more interactions with his classmates and his teachers and he seemed to be more interested in his writing lessons at his language center.

“There were more interactions in writing activities when I studied in the U.S. We could exchange ideas with partners and discuss the topics to write. We were given freedom to select the topic that we were interested in. The teachers were helpful and willing to provide me with many interesting ideas.”

In terms of how writing errors were corrected, Andy noted a significant difference between his home country and the U.S. In Vietnam, he had teachers who spent little time correcting his writing errors. However, when Andy took language courses in the U.S, he appreciated the feedback that his teachers provided on his writing errors. The way such feedback was provided showed a stark contrast to what he previously experienced in his home country.

“One teacher in my grade 10 just underlined sentences or words that he did not understand. [...]. The teachers in my grade 11 and 12 did provide correction, but it seemed that they just focus on grammatical structures. [...] My teachers in the U.S. usually focused on serious errors and went further with their review for individual students.”

How much correction is adequate?

Contrary to a common belief that providing as much correction as possible can be beneficial for students, Andy's experiences show that if his language teachers provided too much correction, it had a negative effect on his motivation to learn. With Andy's English writing, he typically made errors in grammatical structure, word choice and idea expression. When he submitted his writing papers in Vietnam, his teachers normally corrected them by finding all errors and providing corrections. It was common that Andy received back over-corrected writing papers. In his experiences, this method of correcting errors did not help him improve his language abilities. On the contrary, he felt discouraged and lost his motivation to practice writing.

“When looking at these papers, I felt like I was unable to write, even a simple sentence. I did appreciate their time for giving feedback and correction, but you know, too much feedback can make you feel discouraged.”

However, as Andy expressed, if his language teachers gave no feedback or scant corrections, such as underlining incorrect sentences without any explanation, he would lose interest in writing activities.

“My English teachers at university didn't give any correction for my papers. We just submitted and got the grade. So, I thought that my writing practice at university didn't help me at all.”

When Andy talked about his writing experiences in the U.S., he seemed to be more appreciative of his American teachers' feedback. As he stated in his interview, his teacher in the U.S. normally focused on serious errors, leaving him to self-correct the minor ones. Contrary to his efforts in Vietnam, Andy was more interested in reading the feedback and making corrections himself. The level of error correction feedback that he received encouraged him to achieve language accuracy.

“My teachers in the U.S. usually focused on serious errors and went further with their review for individual students. When they graded my paper, they gave very detailed and constructive comments. When I received their feedback, I often read carefully and saw what's wrong with my writing, either word choice or idea expression.”

Therefore, it is true that Andy prefers a judicious amount of feedback on his writing. As he admitted during the interview, too much or too little correction has a negative effect on his motivation to practice language writing.

“If students don't receive any feedback or receive feedback with some sentences or words being underlined or circled, they have no ideas of what's wrong with these sentences. However, if students receive a paper that is overcorrected, they could feel discouraged and have no motivation to write. I personally believe that teachers should correct only serious errors and they can give suggestions.”

The effects of two different error correction methods

In some cases, providing immediate and explicit feedback can help students achieve language accuracy. A common example is the correction of grammar or word choice. However, Andy's experiences call for our re-thinking of this correction method. His Vietnamese teachers' correction methods created a sense of hopelessness in Andy's ability to write well.

“They corrected any errors that they found. They even crossed out my sentences and wrote their own sentences. [...]. When looking at these papers, I felt like I was unable to write, even a simple sentence.”

When Andy wrote for practice in the U.S., the way his teachers corrected his writing was completely different

from what he experienced in his home country. His American teachers preferred delivering delayed and implicit feedback on his writing papers. The main difference is that while the teachers in Vietnam focused on the grammatical aspects of writing, the American teachers attempted to help Andy fluently express his thoughts and ideas.

“To me, they focused on how to express ideas fluently. They thought that students themselves can overcome the grammar mistakes. For word choice errors, they often circled the wrong word and suggested a better one for me.”

Because of the way he received feedback from his American teachers, Andy seemed to be more interested in his writing tasks. When asked whether he enjoyed his writing practice at the language program, he did not hesitate to respond, “Yes”.

“Yes, I really like the way I practiced my writing here because the activities were interesting and my teachers were helpful.”

The direct effect of two contrasting methods of error correction can be found in Andy’s motivation to practice writing in English. The indirect effect is related to his second language writing proficiency. When Andy shared his IELTS score for the writing module, the researcher noticed a significant difference in his English writing proficiency before and after he studied in the U.S. After studying English in his home country for nine years, his IELTS writing score was at 4.5. However, after studying in the U.S. for one year, his score rose significantly to 6.5. Although some variables, such as not using English for a period of time in Vietnam or using English frequently in the U.S. may have had an impact on his score, it is worth learning how different error correction methods have contributed to Andy’s language proficiency development.

Individual help sessions are necessary for error correction.

The most engaging part of the interview was Andy’s admission to receiving individual help sessions after feedback was provided. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, this type of session is often neglected in developing countries, such as China and Vietnam, due to heavy workloads for teachers and relatively large class sizes. However, the idea of individual help sessions is still worth some consideration for helping students achieve language accuracy and thought expression. Apparently, Andy appreciated the help sessions that his American teachers provided for him.

“We should also have a helpful teacher who can help us with error correction and suggest ways to better express our ideas. To me, just having written feedback is not enough. There should be help sessions for individual students so that we can discuss directly with our teachers.”

These sessions may have proved particularly helpful for Andy after he made several attempts to self-correct and improve his writing skills. The feedback allowed him to assess the errors and shortcomings in his writing. When some errors proved too challenging for him to self-correct, the help sessions were a useful strategy. During sessions, Andy could clarify any unclear feedback, and his teachers could identify the type of feedback he needed and how he could improve his subsequent writing papers.

5. Discussions and Recommendations

The first research question of this study explores the impacts of some error correction methods on language learners. Andy has experienced three distinct ways of correcting writing errors in regards to the amount of feedback he received from his teachers. In his home country, he got too much or too little feedback, while in the U.S. he received a more ideal amount of feedback and was also offered help sessions with his teachers. Theme analysis of Andy’s interview has revealed that each method has had a substantial effect, at least on his motivation to practice writing. This initial result is different from Truscott’s (1996) claim that error correction did not have any significant impact on second language writing after his review of two studies by Semke (1984) and Sheppard (1992). Theme analysis also shows that Andy preferred his language writing errors to be corrected in an indirect and delayed manner. As he stated in the interview, immediate and explicit error correction by his teachers, namely giving correction for any errors that they found, elicited negative feelings in Andy and diminished his motivation to practice writing. However, when a delayed and implicit method of correction was delivered, he seemed to be more excited to review the feedback and attempted to reach language accuracy through his self-study activities. This result is in stark contrast with the most recent study by Zahra and Alsadat (2015), who claimed that explicit or direct corrective feedback is significantly superior to implicit or indirect feedback.

The second research question considers some useful strategies for correcting second language writing errors. The analysis of Andy’s experiences has created an outlet for some useful pedagogical implications. It is argued that an adequate amount of correction, depending on language proficiency level, should be provided to assist students in achieving the correct forms of the target language.

First, language teachers should fully understand the reasons why students make errors. The behaviorism theory regards errors as a bad habit that must be corrected immediately by using drills or memorizing the correct

answers. A central tenet of this theory holds that it is the student's fault for such errors, either through carelessness or laziness. SLA theory, on the other hand, posits a different perspective: Errors occur as part of the natural learning process and even the best students make them. When language teachers over-correct, students tend to write to avoid mistakes rather than to learn to write successfully.

Second, before giving corrective feedback, language teachers should identify the nature of each error. Some errors are caused by a student's lack of attention, or carelessness. For example, some students of high language proficiency may omit "s/es" in plural nouns or verbs in the present tense. Still other errors are caused during the processing of language acquisition. For instance, some Vietnamese students may misuse "but" after "although" (the result of transferring from the L1) or think that the verb form of "doctor" is "doct" (an effect of overgeneralization). These overgeneralizations commonly occur because students know that the verb form of "actor" is "act" and therefore assume the same for "doctor" and "doct".

Third, appropriate corrective strategies should be given to each error identified. If errors occur because of a student's lack of attention or carelessness, the errors should not be corrected immediately. Rather, teachers should encourage a course of self-correction and attention to form by the student. However, errors that occur consistently during the process of language acquisition should be explained clearly. From the previous example, if students fail to use the structure "although" successfully due to the impact of L1 on L2, the form for that structure should be written clearly on a white board, followed by mechanical drills and meaningful practice. Similarly, some students may assume that the opposite of "comfort" is "uncomfort" because they previously encountered "uncomfortable" as the antonym of "comfortable".

Moreover, language teachers should provide an adequate amount of correction in classrooms, especially when correcting student writing. Martínez (1999) believed that excessive feedback on errors could have a negative impact on student motivation. To strengthen this claim, Harmer (2000) maintained that students who see a paper covered in red ink are convinced that they are unable to write in another language, thus having a discouraging effect on motivation.

Therefore, teachers should correct only serious errors and underline or circle other errors so that students can self-correct when they review their graded papers. The purpose of self-correction is, according to Karra (2006), to help students know how to identify an error to avoid it in the future. Teachers can ask students to proofread carefully to check for spelling, grammar, and vocabulary before making submissions or to self-correct errors that have been highlighted by teachers. If errors still persist, teachers should help by making the appropriate corrections.

In addition, language teachers need to be more flexible with their methods of correcting errors. Since language learners vary in age and characteristics, there is no single method that can be used for all types of learners. Young learners may welcome more feedback and correction than older ones. Correcting older learners too much may discourage their motivation and willingness to learn the language.

The interview with Andy shows that the individual help sessions with his American teachers assisted him in improving his writing skills. During these sessions, he had opportunities to consult with his teachers to correct his errors and come up with some writing models to express his thoughts and ideas more fluently and naturally. He had not had such experiences in his home country. Although it can be challenging for teachers in developing countries, it is worth considering the adoption of these sessions in language classes. Andy's class sizes in the U.S. are smaller and hence the teachers have more time to focus on individual students. Unfortunately, in his home country, it is typical to see more than 40 students in one language class, creating heavier workloads for teachers.

6. Limitations

In terms of methodology, this study consists of only one participant, hence the findings cannot adequately represent all other students who are receiving error correction from their teachers. In addition, this qualitative study may be influenced by the researcher's subjectivity and familiarity with the participant, especially during data interpretation. Therefore, it is necessary that the researcher attains a solid grasp of the phenomenon through intensive literature review and remains open to any contradictory results. This study may be strengthened or confirmed with a larger number of participants within the same phenomenon.

In terms of research findings, this study depends heavily on the participant's accurate recollection of previous experiences. The participant's discomfort or lack of information during the interview is the main confounding variable for the study. Therefore, further evidence is needed to enhance the external validity of this study.

7. Conclusion

The theme analysis of Andy's interview has shown that the ways in which his writing errors were corrected had an impact on his language writing. Drawing from Andy's experiences, it is argued that certain language teachers could handle their students' errors in second language writing more appropriately and selectively. It should be noted that not all errors need to be corrected and language teachers should analyze the variables for each error

before making any correction.

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