Feedback on Writing:
Changing EFL Students' Attitudes

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Extensive research has been conducted about feedback on writing in both L1 and L2 classrooms. Although much of the research suggests that correcting grammar does not help students make long-term improvements, many teachers continue to believe that they must correct all errors. In addition, students report that they want teachers to mark errors. This article reports on the attitude of students of English as a foreign language when presented with feedback that that gives motivating, positive comments coupled with suggestions for improvement. Many students learned to accept this feedback, but many wanted the addition of correction of every grammatical error.

Des recherches approfondies ont porté sur le fait de fournir de la rétroaction sur la rédaction dans les salles de classe L1 et L2. Bien qu'une part importante de la recherche indique que la correction de la grammaire n'aide pas les élèves à s'améliorer à long terme, plusieurs enseignants persistent à croire qu'ils doivent corriger toutes les fautes. Cet article rend compte de l'attitude d'élèves d'anglais comme langue étrangère lorsqu'on leur fait des commentaires positifs, motivants et accompagnés de suggestions sur des façons de s'améliorer. Plusieurs des élèves ont appris à accepter ce genre de rétroaction, mais beaucoup d'entre eux voulaient qu'on corrige également toutes les fautes grammaticales.

Introduction

A substantial amount of work has been published about giving feedback on foreign or second language written work (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 2002, 2003; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984), and it has been suggested by many that teachers should avoid overcorrecting their students' writing (Hendrickson, 1980; Raimes, 1983; Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985). Some even suggest that no grammatical errors should be marked (Truscott, 1996, makes the strongest argument).

However, many researchers and teachers believe that grammatical correction of some kind is necessary when responding to student writing. A number of researchers have noted that teachers even feel obligated to correct grammatical errors in their learners' written work. For example, Dohrer (1991) points out that many teachers (and even students) consider the number of marked errors to be a justification for the grade given. Similarly, Keh (1990) notes that "red marks on students' papers may also 'prove' the

teacher's superiority over students and demonstrate that the teacher is 'doing his/her job'" (p. 294). Ancker (2000) describes interviews with teachers from around the world who have expressed the same sentiment. This prevalent attitude results in the extensive marking of errors in student writing. And even as teachers feel the need to mark errors, students also want correction (Leki, 1991).

However, what about the research that says that grammatical correction is not the best way to respond to students' writing? Teachers continue to mark grammatical errors although "the literature abounds with proof of the futility of marking errors in both native and non-native student writing" (Leki, 1991, p. 204). If teachers decide that they want to try alternative ways of commenting on students' writing, how can they justify the change to themselves and to their students? With this question in mind, the current study is a report of one attempt to change the attitudes of three groups of EFL students toward their teacher's feedback on written work. This was conducted through a series of chats in class, an emphasis on nongrammatical feedback on written exercises, and self-evaluation surveys.

Attitudes and Effectiveness of Feedback

Every language teacher knows the desire to mark all a student's errors. We spend hours marking students' papers with circles, underlining errors, and using various editing symbols, only to see the same errors appear on the following assignment. Why is this? What happens to all the time we spend on marking all those errors? Is it wasted time?

According to several researchers, yes, we have wasted our time marking students' grammatical errors. Ferris (1995) points out that "despite the perceived importance of the role of the teacher in responding to student writing, research in both L1 and L2 student writing provides very little evidence that such feedback actually helps the students' writing improve" (p. 34). But the desire to continue marking student errors is strong. For example, even reporting the apparent futility of error correction, Ferris claims that students do benefit from grammar comments and suggestions about organization and content. And Leki (1990), for example, points out that students want every error marked, although she also points out that many students simply look at their grade and not the teacher's corrections and comments.

So although students want to see their work corrected, a substantial amount of evidence has been presented that calls the effectiveness of this practice into question. For example, Robb et al. (1986) conducted a study of various types of feedback with four groups: correction group (teacher corrected all errors but did not comment on content or organization); coded feedback group (errors were marked with a code); uncoded feedback group (errors were marked with a highlighter); and marginal feedback group (the number of errors per line was indicated, but no errors were identified). They

found that none of the feedback types resulted in long-term grammatical improvement and concluded that their results did not support the practice of marking grammatical errors extensively. They suggest that teachers use their time to respond to "more important aspects of student writing" (p. 91). As Raimes (1983) explains, "understanding and producing accurate grammatical forms is a parallel activity to composing" (p. 267), but it should not become the central focus of a teacher's feedback. Thus teachers' efforts should be expended on responding to content and composition-based issues rather than correcting grammatical errors. Mechanical errors can be dealt with in a number of alternative manners, from error logs to focused mini-lessons (Ferris, 2002).

It is important also to mention that the research does show that making comments about content and organization does help students to improve the quality of their writing. Hedgecock and Lefkowitz (1996) cite other authors (Sheppard, 1992; Kepner, 1991) who have come to the same conclusion: form-focused feedback is not as effective as content feedback in terms of eventual attainment.

Additional evidence can be found in Kepner (1991), who in a comparative study of feedback types (content feedback vs. grammatical correction) found that students who received only content feedback produced writing that had more "higher-level propositions" (better content) than students who received grammar-only feedback. In addition, students who received surface-level feedback did not produce fewer errors than the uncorrected group. In addition, Hillocks (1986) and Truscott (1996) both reviewed many research studies and concluded that in most of them, teachers' comments on grammar were shown to have little or no long-term effect on students' writing.

Even those who support the use of grammatical correction of writing assignments show results that can be interpreted as illustrating the ineffectiveness of this type of correction. For example, Fathman and Whalley (1990), in a comparative study of four groups of students (no feedback, grammar feedback only, content feedback only, content and grammar feedback), found that grammatical correction was helpful from the first draft to the revision stage of a single assignment, but provided no evidence that suggested long-term grammatical improvement. Interestingly, even the group that received no comments at all made short-term improvements in both grammatical accuracy and content.

Semke (1984) found that German-as-a-foreign-language students who received comments on content wrote much more than students who received grammatical corrections. Similarly, Gee (1972) studied native English-speaking students in three groups who received praise, no comments, or criticism (on superficial mechanical/grammatical errors and on content and style) and found that both the negative criticism and no-comments groups wrote less than the group that received praise.

Additional support for this approach comes from Dragga (1985, 1988), who recommends "praiseworthy grading" as a strategy to focus students' attention on what works well in their writing as opposed to what they do wrong. Many teachers and students in his study concluded that this positive emphasis on feedback was "ultimately rewarding" (1988, p. 47).

All this research leads to a dilemma for teachers. Radecki and Swales (1988) explain that if teachers "do not surface-correct but respond to a writer's meaning, their credibility among their students can be impaired" (p. 364). As mentioned above, most students expect correction, and many teachers feel the need to justify their grading and superiority. But for those noting the tendency of research to downplay the usefulness of this grammatical correction with respect to long-term improvement, something needs to be done to help justify a change. Radecki and Swales say that "teachers must intervene and change student attitudes; one way for teachers to change their students is by sharing with them the research in writing. Thus they could possibly vindicate their methods and reputation" (p. 364). This might be an effective way for teachers to address the problem. By teaching their students about the research findings, they may be able to help them accept a different approach to feedback. Similarly, Schulz (1996, 2001) suggests that teachers and students talk and explore varying points of view in order to avoid conflicts and to maximize positive attitudes toward the teacher's chosen path of instruction.

If we accept the accuracy of the research indicating limited-effectiveness error correction of student writing, we will see a need to negotiate an understanding between teachers and students about feedback techniques, especially as Radecki and Swales (1988) describe. Considering this, the approach taken in the current study was to see if it would be possible for high-intermediate EFL university students to accept the change from an emphasis on grammatical correction to feedback mostly on content and rhetorical issues in their writing assignments.

Changing Students' Attitudes

A major factor in my decision to try to move away from a reliance on grammar-focused feedback on writing assignments came from sources that discussed the possibility of changing students' attitudes toward classroom practices. Mantle-Bromley (1995) explains the nature of attitude theory involving three components: attitude, cognition, and behavior. In order to promote attitudinal change, one proposed suggestion is to have a classroom environment that is "one of 'change and novelty'" (p. 374). As a result, students are forced to consider their attitudes, and the potential for change is created.

An example comes from Winer (1992), who reports on the attitudes of student teachers toward writing and the teaching of writing. Most of her 100

graduate student participants started a training course with a negative attitude toward writing in general. Winer explains that her students' complaints came from their own experiences as students of writing, when there was "an undue emphasis on superficial errors in grammar and spelling without regard to content … and a nonsupportive, nonsympathetic attitude on the part of the teacher" (p. 61). After starting her course with an attitude survey, Winer created a series of activities based on journal-writing, peer feedback, and teacher-student conversations that were used to help these student teachers change their attitudes about writing. They were asked to do the same writing assignments they were giving their students so that they could measure how interesting or boring each was. They were also asked to revise their own work so that they could understand how their students would feel when forced to revise. And they were specifically coached on how to give feedback in a positive way that would encourage their students, not crush them under the burden of being "punished" by rewriting. Winer reports that by the end of the one-semester course, most student teachers in her class did indeed change their attitudes toward writing and teaching writing by being forced to look at the issues in a novel way.

With all this in mind, the following study was developed to answer this question: Can EFL university students accept an emphasis on comments about content and suggestions for improving the quality of their writing instead of a focus on grammatical corrections?

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were three groups of high-intermediate students enrolled in a sixth-semester English-language course in a large public university in Colombia. All the students spoke Spanish as their native language and were modern language majors studying both English and French as foreign languages in order to graduate as licensed teachers. The first five semesters of language study in English were focused on general skill-building, and the sixth semester was dedicated to putting the basic skills into practice through extensive writing.

The observations for this study were made with three groups of students. The first group was from 1997 (14 students), the second from 1999 (16 students), and the third from 2000 (24 students). The basic material covered in each group was the same (writing development from paragraphs to essays, various genres of essays, and research writing), with changes in the presentation of material reflecting the instructor's own development in the theory and practice of nontraditional teaching and evaluation, with a focus on multiple intelligence theory and on teaching for understanding.

Ethnographic Methods

Presentation of new ideas. In addition to the regular topics of the course, which were covered over an 18-week semester, a small amount of class time was spent on explaining various perspectives on marking students' essays. The first such chat took place in the second week of the semester before any written assignments had been graded and had as its primary objective to introduce research about the effectiveness of grammatical correction in improving written language. The teacher asked the students questions and listened to them, making notes about their responses in her journal. A separate journal was kept for each course.

The first question the teacher asked during the first chat was, "How have your previous language teachers responded to your written assignments?" This question was designed to elicit responses from the students in each group and to start them thinking about what they had experienced in the past. After having a chance to respond, the students were asked, "What would you *like* your teachers to do?" The purpose of this question was to introduce the affective dimension of feedback to see if what students had received was what they really wanted at an emotional level.

After these questions and responses, the instructor explained that she was going to describe some research on the topic of providing grammatical corrections for composition assignments. The first article presented was Semke (1984). The instructor began by describing the four experimental groups, writing each on the board (1. comments only, 2. corrections only, 3. corrections with comments, and 4. student self-correction). Then she asked the students, "Can you predict which group improved the most after one semester of work?" When the students had had the opportunity to give their opinion (the number of votes was written next to each experimental group), the instructor explained Semke's findings. The group that improved the least was group 4: student self-correction. The group that improved the most both in terms of accuracy and fluency was group 1: comments only. The students who received grammatical correction either by itself or combined with comments on content did improve, but not as much as the first group.

This same format was used for introducing additional research by Cardelle and Corno (1981). They had four research groups: 1. praise, 2. criticism (grammatical correction), 3. criticism plus praise, and 4. no feedback. Of the four groups, the combined group (group 3) made the most improvement over the time of the study, and also students were more motivated by that type of combined feedback. After reviewing the results of these studies, the last question in this chat was, "How would you like me to respond to your written assignments?"

The students continued the semester writing a great deal in both their journals and in other assignments and essays. The assignments in the first six weeks of the semester were focused on developing paragraph structure in

English, and the feedback on these early assignments consisted mostly of positive comments about the development of ideas with specific suggestions for improving content, organization, or rhetoric. In general, little attention was given to grammatical errors.

The first self-evaluation took place during the seventh week of the semester (see Appendix), followed by the second chat in the eighth week. After receiving the teacher's mid-term evaluation of their work, the students were asked these questions: "What is your opinion of the way I am responding to your writing?" and "What do you remember about the research I mentioned at the beginning of the semester?"

The third chat occurred in the 10th week of classes after the teacher had returned an essay assignment that had received only grammatical corrections as a contrast to the other feedback that she had been giving. The first question was, "How do you feel right now after receiving the essay with grammatical corrections?" Then the students were asked to reflect on the feelings they had on other days when the teacher had returned assignments with comments on the content and organization and little focus on grammar. They were then asked, "Do you feel different with these two types of correction?"

The second self-evaluation was collected in the 12th week of classes (see Appendix), followed by the fourth chat. The students were asked the following question: "After receiving mostly comments on content, how do you feel about your writing?" After listening to their responses, the teacher explained that even many native speakers make grammatical and spelling errors when writing. Because of this, the goal for these EFL students should not be to slow the development of their ideas by examining surface-level errors. Instead, it should be to help them reach a level where they could clearly express their ideas despite a few remaining errors. The teacher explained again that the comments on content had been provided with that specific goal in mind: to give the students the tools needed to be confident to write a text that made sense and that communicated a clear idea. The final self-evaluation was given during the 14th week of class (see Appendix).

Comments on essays and journals. The primary origin of the writing on which feedback was provided was a journal that each student kept and that contained all in-class work. Additional feedback was given on periodic formal paragraph and essay assignments (approximately one per month). The teacher-researcher collected the journals every two to three weeks, read the various assignments, and made comments, mostly on the content of what was written, but with occasional grammatical corrections or suggestions when the problems were consistent or serious. Most grammatical errors were overlooked in favor of a focus on encouragement so that the students would write more and increase their fluency. The comments on the first drafts of the essays focused on improving organization, coherence, and the presentation

of ideas (justification, details, etc.). The final drafts generally received comments about how well the students had acted on the comments on earlier drafts.

Self-Evaluations.

Students in the study were given three self-evaluations throughout each course in order to measure their attitudes. The first was conducted during the seventh week of class just before the teacher gave the students their mid-term evaluations of development in various areas. The second was administered in the 12th week of class. The last was done during the 16th week just before the end of the course. The self-evaluations looked for information about various aspects of the class and the students' own learning (see Appendix). In addition to questions about receiving feedback on their writing, these evaluations included questions about the students' goals for the course, their activities in English outside the class, and their desire for activities in class. At least one of the questions on each evaluation dealt with the students' opinions of the comments and corrections that were given on their written assignments.

Results and Discussion

Presentation of New Ideas

In the first chat, students were asked, "How have your previous language teachers responded to your written assignments?" The answers from all three groups revealed that teachers in the first five levels of English at the university generally had focused their energy on correcting grammatical errors on all written assignments. Little time was devoted to commenting on how to improve students' writing in ways other than grammatical correctness. When asked "What would you like your teachers to do?" most students explained that they felt that what they had been receiving was an appropriate way to deal with their errors (they mentioned that all their language teachers in both high school and university had the same style for responding to written work). They expected such correction, and as a result, accepted it. The students did note, however, that this type of feedback was not "nice," nor did it motivate them to write more or to be more creative in their efforts to complete assignments.

When the students were asked to predict which of the groups made the most progress in the Semke (1984) study, the majority in all three groups chose group 3, those who received both comments and corrections, followed by a number of students who chose group 2, correction only. They expressed surprise that the group that received comments only made the most improvement. The outcome of Cardelle and Corno's study was more in line with what the students expected. After seeing these results, their response to

the final question—"How would you like me to respond to your written assignments?"—most students suggested a combination of comments on content along with grammatical corrections, although some expressed a preference for the status quo: primarily correcting errors.

It is interesting to note that the teacher's reputation of having an alternative manner of giving feedback became well known over the period covered by this study. The first group of students (1997) was initially the most reluctant to accept any type of feedback that was different from what they had previously known. By the second group (1999), the students were prepared for a change from the mold, but they still had to be convinced of the benefits of this new system of feedback. However, by the time the third group (2000) was taking the class, the word was out, and the students were expecting something else. The number of students enrolled in the course had also risen, specifically because the third group of students wished to experience this type of writing course. This made it easier to address the feedback issues with this group.

The second chat elicited responses similar to those in the first. Students were feeling more motivated about writing, but they still felt that more emphasis on grammar would help them continue to improve. When asked about the research cited at the beginning of the semester (specifically Semke's (1984) research), the students in the first two groups (1997 and 1999) were generally unable to remember the specific details. As a result, the researcher reviewed the studies again, and the students expressed their renewed understanding that comments on content could indeed work to improve motivation toward writing as well as fluency when faced with most assignments. By contrast, the 2000 group remembered more of the details from the research than the previous groups. This may have been because of their more accepting attitude toward a change in feedback methodology.

In the third chat, when asked how they felt after receiving an assignment with all the grammatical errors marked, most students responded negatively, especially those from the 2000 group. They said that they did not like to see their papers covered in red marks. When asked to compare this feeling with their attitude when they received comments on content, most responded that they felt more motivated than when the teacher simply marked grammar. However, several students pointed out that a balance between grammatical corrections and comments on content would be the best way for them to improve as writers.

In the fourth chat, when asked how they felt in general about the effects of feedback, most said that they had positive attitudes toward writing, something they admitted they did not have when beginning the semester. Many noted that they felt more confident as writers and that they enjoyed the writing tasks more than in previous courses. Most students, however, still pointed out that they felt that a number of the errors that they had made

when writing had not been addressed much during the semester. After the teacher explained that the goal had been to get them to develop as writers who would be able to deal with a variety of writing assignments in English, almost all the students reported that they did in fact feel more confident when presented with a writing task. They explained that they thought this was due in part to the motivating comments they had received during the semester.

Comments on Essays and Journals

Students completed periodic formal essay assignments as well as daily journal activities. Typical comments from the teacher on formal essay drafts were:

> (On a penultimate draft) Clear objectives, nice organization and presentation of information. Good use of quotations to explain and support your ideas. You met the first two objectives that you set out for yourself, but you only briefly discuss the third (about education). You should review the objectives in the conclusion to remind the reader (and yourself) that you have met them. (1997)

> (On a final draft) Good work. I'm impressed with the changes you have made. Good use of quotation to support your opinion. Good reference list—complete and accurate. Better grammatical control (there are some errors that remain, but nothing serious). (1997)

> (On a final draft) You have made some good changes since the first draft. You have explained how Magroll and hopelessness are the main points of your essay—it is much more clear now. You have also added citations that explain where the ideas come from, which is good. (1999)

In the formal essay feedback, the focus for early drafts was on making global improvements in the organization and presentation of ideas. Comments on final drafts mentioned how the students had progressed as well as areas that could be improved. In contrast, the following are examples of the teacher's comments on journal entries.

> Wow! What a story! You and your partner have a wild imagination! I guess I should say "congratulations"!? I was truly surprised by the ending. (1999)

> You have a very well-done, organized and colorful journal. You have a lot of ideas and you write about everything; that's great! Like when you wrote about dreams. I used to have dreams almost every night. I wish I could remember everything. (2000)

> First of all, I want to comment on your three favorites. Yes, your headline poem is very nice, as your classmates' comments reflect. And

I'm glad that you liked it. That is very important when you are developing your writing. If you aren't pleased with your work, there is a tendency to stop writing. And I hope you are pleased with other things you have written—I would like to see you continue improving! (2000)

The primary purpose of the comments on journal entries was to motivate the students and to highlight their communication of ideas. With this in mind, the teacher tried to choose specific pieces and respond to them at a personal or emotional level. According to research by Dragga (1985, 1988) and others, this type of response to the communicated message motivates the student to continue to write.

Self-Evaluations

In the first self-evaluation, of 24 students in the 2000 group, 22 responded to the question: "Which type of feedback do you think is more effective to help you improve your written English: a: comments on content or b: grammatical corrections." From the 1999 group, all 16 students responded to this question, whereas in the 1997 group, 13 of the 14 students responded.

Despite emphasis in the class away from grammatical corrections and toward the implications of the research, which showed that marking grammar errors is of limited use, the most common attitude expressed by students from all three groups was a wish both for comments on content and for corrections of grammar. Many students explained that content-based comments made them feel good because they could see that their message was being received by a responsive reader, and as a result they were motivated to write more. However, they also noted that in order to recognize mistakes and make corrections, they needed more grammatical correction. Some students were not able to appreciate the importance of comments on rhetorical and organizational problems in their writing.

In the group from 2000, 16 of the 22 students answering this question suggested that both comments and corrections were important for improved writing. In 1999, 12 of 16 students agreed with this point of view, and in 1997, 12 out of 13 were in agreement.

The following comments illustrate this viewpoint.

I think both can help us to improve our writing because it is a combination that involves the academic and affective part of everyone. (2000)

I think both are most important because it's good to see what other people think about a subject or topic. It can be useful for you as a person and as a writer. On the other hand, I think that someone who can show you what your errors are is giving to you an opportunity to learn or correct something. (2000)

The comments on content let me know if my writing is easy to understand, give me more confidence and furthermore it is nice to listen opinions; and it is also important the corrections in grammar because that way I know my mistakes and I can learn from them. (1999)

Sometimes I feel good when I don't see correction about my grammar, but sometimes it is necessary. (1999)

These examples demonstrate a certain degree acceptance that comments on content can be useful. These students express the positive affective results of this type of Dragga-style "praiseworthy" grading, but at the same time they note that grammar correction still plays an important role for them in their development as writers in a foreign language, just as Cardelle and Corno (1981) found.

The following set of comments helps illustrate the range of varying students' attitudes to comments on content; these other individuals seem to be much more willing than those above to accept that for long-term improvement, comments on the content and organization of writing can be more beneficial than specific grammatical corrections.

Grammar isn't sufficient to write well. We always write about something or someone, for example: I can use well the grammar, but in the writing my ideas can be contradictories or don't have them sense. (1999)

Grammar is important, but the most important is content correction because with content correction we can know about the structure of an English paragraph. (1997)

I feel grammar correction is important, but not too much. So is more important content correction because grammar will improve with the practice. (1997)

This final example clearly reflects what several researchers insist on: grammatical accuracy improves with practice (Truscott, 1996; Semke, 1984; among others), rather than with extensive correction of errors. However, because of the time-consuming nature of marking every grammatical error, many teachers decide to reduce the amount of writing that their students do (Kepner, 1991). This reduces the time they need to respond, but at the same time diminishes the number of opportunities the students have for improvement through practice. Writing does not have to be a punishment for the students and the teacher; it can be much more communicative. If a teacher uses a communicative style of responding, the teacher and students alike can learn to see writing as an enjoyable medium for language practice.

Although most of the students changed their attitudes and came to accept that comments on content were valuable, one from the 2000 group specifical-

ly pointed out that although comments on content expressed the teacher's opinions, this was not perceived as helpful.

> Corrections on grammar improve my writing because correction on content only give me opinion of my journal but no more. (2000)

This judgment appears to be reflected in research by Burkland and Grimm (1986), who found that students preferred criticism (in other words, grammatical correction) "and had an ambivalence about praise" (p. 242). Leki (1990) also noted that many students do not consider praise to be useful. The status quo in favor of grammatical correction is strong, and it appears that in any group there will be a few students who refuse to accept a change.

Thus it is notable that every year, a small group of student opinions did in fact reflect a preference for grammatical correction. Five students of 22 in the 2000 group expressed their preference for this type of feedback, and four of 16 from 1999 had the same opinion. And one student out of 13 from the 1997 group suggested that grammar was more important than content. These excerpts illustrate students' attitudes in this connection.

> I think the most effective to help me to improve my writing is correction on grammar because if you make the respective corrections I will see my faults. (2000)

> I need to improve my grammar to make good contents. (1999)

This group of students was unable to accept the change in perspective on the feedback to their writing. However, most did come to accept comments on content as an important element in feedback.

With regard to the question "Did you study the grammatical corrections that I made in order to try to learn from your errors? Why or why not?"—in the second round of self-evaluations—almost all the students said that they did indeed study the corrected errors. Many students wrote comments like this:

> Yes because I really want to learn from my errors and don't do them each time I want to write about the same idea. (1997)

> Yes because I would have to find my mistakes and I will like to learn about grammar. (1997)

> Yes, I did because with the grammatical correction I can improve my others works. And I try to improve more. (1999)

> Yes, I did, however it's difficult because we have mistakes that nobody have made us a correction so we were using that for a long time. (2000)

However, when returning work that had grammar corrections, the teacher herself noticed that few students seemed to take time in class to review the

corrections or to ask questions about what was incorrect. Most of them read the end comment and the grade and put their papers away. This does not mean that the students did not later study the corrections, but there is always a question as to whether they learned from this type of correction. Other students in their self-evaluations were perhaps more honest about what they did with the teacher's corrections.

Not all of them because I forgot some of them. (1999)

Not really, sometimes this is not an excuse, but sometimes I feel really tired because of my work and I don't do my best in class. (2000)

I try to take that corrections into account, but unfortunately, I can't remember all of them when I'm writing. (2000)

Finally, on the final self-evaluation in response to the question "Do you feel that you write with fewer mistakes now than at the beginning of the course? Why?" the students reported positive results.

I feel I have improved.

I think I am more careful when I am writing.

I feel happy because I noted that I have improved my English.

Yes, I feel that each mistake goes away while I am writing.

This suggests that despite the change in emphasis away from the kind of grammatical correction that so many students appeared to prefer at the outset, or maybe because of it, students ended the course feeling much more positive about their ability to write. They had more confidence and worried less about superficial errors.

Conclusions

Some research suggests that it is a waste of time for teachers meticulously to mark every error students make in their written work. Despite this body of research, teachers and students continue to believe that corrections are necessary. If a teacher decides to accept a low-grammatical-correction stance in giving feedback in favor of an emphasis on content-based feedback, he or she needs to know if this will be accepted by the students and even by colleagues. In answer to the research question "Can EFL university students accept an emphasis on comments about content and suggestions for improving the quality of the writing instead and emphasis on corrections on grammar?" this report provides some evidence that it is indeed possible to modify students' opinions about feedback.

During three one-semester writing courses, three groups of students were exposed to an alternative approach to feedback through a series of short

chats describing the relevant research and through the personal experience of receiving mostly motivating, positive feedback with suggestions for improvement. Based on this exposure, students' attitudes began to change. Although not everyone grew to accept the kind of praiseworthy grading recommended by Dragga (1985, 1988), most did learn to accept content feedback as an important part of learning how to write in a foreign language.

This study is not a rigorous experimental study with control and experimental groups, but as an ethnographic-type study, the comments expressed can be taken to represent the attitudes of these particular students under the specific circumstances described. For many EFL teachers in similar situations, this may provide the motivation to move away from relying exclusively on extensive grammar corrections toward a feedback style that is more concerned with content, organization, and other communicative issues. The research suggests that this is likely to be beneficial and effective for our students because they will be motivated to write based on the communication that is established with the teacher and others, and also because the teacher can assign more work if the grading-marking time is reduced. This results in more practice for the students, which can provide them with opportunities for continued improvement. The problem for individual teachers is to change our paradigm in order to accept this different approach to feedback and at the same time to help the students understand it and accept it; this long-term research project has provided evidence that such a change in attitude is possible.

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Appendix

First Self-Evaluation

1. What has been one thing that you have learned so far?
2. What skill do you feel you need the most work in (reading, writing, speaking, listening)?

3. What could you do to improve this? Will you do it? Why or why not?
4. What can I do to help you improve this skill?
5. Which type of feedback is more effective to help you improve your written English: a: comments on content or b: corrections of grammar? Why?
6. What would you like to see more of in the class?
7. What would you like to see eliminated from the class?

Second Self-Evaluation

1. What skill do you feel you have improved the most in so far in this course (reading, writing, speaking, listening)?
2. Did you study the grammatical corrections that I made in order to try to learn from your errors? Why or why not?
3. Have you done research writing before? If so, what is it? If not, what do you think it will be?
4. What would you like to see more of in the second half of the course?

Third Self-Evaluation

1. In this course, what has been the most important thing you learned?
2. What skill do you feel you have improved the most in this semester (speaking, listening, reading, writing)?
3. What skill do you feel you need the most work in?
4. During this semester, what did you do outside of class to improve your English language skills?
5. Regarding research writing, what do you think you still need to learn?
6. Do you feel that you write with fewer mistakes now than at the beginning of the course? Why?
7. Why are you majoring in Modern Languages (what are your goals)?
8. Do you think you have done everything you can in this class to help you meet your goals? Why or why not?