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## THE USE OF CODED FEEDBACK TO ENHANCE THE LEARNERS' AWARENESS AND ACCURACY IN EFL WRITING

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### Abstract

To many scholars, error correction plays a significant role in improving learners' accuracy in language learning especially in EFL writing, which is grammatically demanding. In terms of teachers' roles in giving correction, the popular misunderstanding overemphasizes teachers' responsibility in carrying out the task while ignoring learners' roles in the process of error correction. Accordingly, this paper aims to signify the advantages of coded feedback in relation to the development of EFL learners' writing skill. Notwithstanding coded feedback's requiring learners' autonomy during the error correction process, the method offers a challenging and stimulating way of error correction in writing. This paper will cover the characteristics of coded feedback and its benefits towards the learners' writing skill development.

Keywords: *treatable and untreatable errors, error correction methods, coded feedback, awareness and accuracy*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

While error correction existence is definite within second language learning especially in EFL writing, the choice of the appropriate method to be applied is still in debate. The decisive job of selecting the appropriate method lies in the hands of the teachers. Being a recursive process, writing takes several times for learners to revise their works before submitting their final draft (White & McGovern, 1994). During the course, they need feedback and comments to facilitate them to compose an essay with minimal errors as well as maximum accuracy and clarity; hence, written feedback is quite essential (Creme & Lea, 1997; Ennis, 1996; Ferris, 2002; Harmer, 2001; Krashen, 1987; Kroll, 2001). However, teachers often feel that their effort in giving feedback to correct

learners' works is not effective. Some of learners keep on committing the same errors, and teachers realize that it is difficult for learners to achieve accuracy in writing, which is grammatically demanding (Littlewood, 1995; Stern, 1992). Therefore, teachers should realize the vital role of error correction, pick up the appropriate method, and treat it carefully.

The proposed coded feedback is an indirect correction method which requires the teachers' participation and at the same time gives space to the learners' autonomy. In terms of teachers' roles in giving correction, the popular misunderstanding overemphasizes teachers' responsibility in carrying out the task while ignoring learners' roles in the process of error correction. In fact, learners can make more progress when

they are given chances to respond to correction and contribute to the process. Reflected on it, it is realized that students need more than just transcribing teachers' correction in their writing to avoid making similar errors in their future writing. The realization of helping students fix their errors on their own, prompts the writer to introduce the use of coded feedback in teaching EFL writing context. Hence, this paper aims to find out how coded feedback can be challenging as well as beneficial to enhance the learners' awareness and accuracy in EFL writing.

## 2. DISCUSSION

### *2.1 Errors; "Treatable" and "Untreatable"*

The emergence of errors is obvious in the language learning process and treatments to them are significant to the learners' language development. Scholars and linguists agree with the idea that errors are predictors of language learning. Davis and Pearse (2000: 103) explain that "errors are integral part of language learning and not evidence of failure to learn". Thus, they should be perceived as rites of passage between what has been and what has to be learned still (Smith, 1994) since they are considered "provisional forms" (Yule and Tarone, 1995: 7). More specifically, in second language learning, Hedge (2000: 15) points out that "errors are now seen as reflections of a learner's stage of interlanguage development". Hence, errors should be treated carefully from the perspectives of both the teachers and the learners.

Within the EFL learning teaching context, writing in particular, there are two different types of errors. Ferris (1999) introduces a distinction between

"treatable" and "untreatable" errors, suggesting that the former (verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, article usage, plural and possessive noun endings, and sentence fragments) occur in a rule-governed way, and so learners can be pointed to a grammar book or set of rules to resolve the error, while the latter (word choice errors, with the possible exception of some pronoun and preposition uses, and unidiomatic sentence structure, resulting from problems to do with word order and missing or unnecessary words) are idiosyncratic and so require learners to utilize acquired knowledge of the language to correct the error. This distinction has been examined in two recent studies (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

### *2.2 Teacher's and Learners' Roles in Error Correction*

Language teachers hold the authority to correct learners' errors, especially regarding the fact that the learners' value and expect teachers' feedback on their written work. Thus, language teachers play several important roles as follows: The first language teachers' role is as judges. As the one being authoritative in the classroom, teachers have the right to set the standard of what the learners have to achieve in the writing course (Crema and Lea, 1997: 44; Scott, 1996: 120). However, learners' level has to be taken into consideration so that they are capable of achieving the expectation (Ferris, 2003). Thus, teachers have to adjust their expectation and teaching method to suit the learners' level. Teachers should also identify common errors learners make so that they have some thought of what to do next with their

teaching methodology (Leech, 1994).

The second role of language teachers is as designers. As designers, teachers should always concern about what is best and suitable for learners. This way, they should update themselves with what is going on inside their classroom, to be able to make right pedagogic decision to apply particular error correction methods. Preferably, teachers are advocated to exchange information and experience with other colleagues to expand their insight, and hopefully, to get new ideas on error correction methods.

The third role is teachers as scholars. In order to provide correction to learners, teachers must act as scholars, who are equipped with knowledge of the target language, such as grammar, vocabulary and so forth to enable them to provide correction to learners' writing (Leech, 1994). In addition, teachers have to put themselves on learners' shoes. For instance, by understanding the source of errors and implementing the "process of simplification" so that they are able to transfer their knowledge in such a clear and simple way to learners at different proficiency level (Leech, 1994).

The fourth role of the teachers is as motivators. Learners' affective side also plays important roles in enhancing their language progress. Motivation is a powerful desire which drives learners to accomplish more. Generally, it is unpleasant experience to be corrected and some of learners may get frustrated and demotivated because they might not know what to do. That is why teachers have to inspire and convince learners that teachers welcome their questions and worries. Positive comments on their work are also accommodating to motivate learners to pursue more

(Wright, 1987; Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

The last role of the language teachers is as trainers. Teachers have to boost learners' confidence and train them to be more independent in their learning. Teachers are encouraged to give learners more chances to have peer feedback session so that they will go through the process of correcting others' work. Teachers should also help learners to identify their individual errors; thus, they have to pay more attention to those errors. This way, learners will be equipped to learn how to self-correct their writing (Ferris, 2002; Xiang, 2004).

Teachers' effort will be less effective unless learners want to give right responses. Accordingly, learners are responsible to involve in the error correction process by playing their roles as; first, active participants in the class; second, attentive monitors of their own progress, and third, autonomous learners.

First, learners' active participation during the process of error correction is very essential. Good interaction between them and the teachers is crucial to establish conducive learning atmosphere. It is not an easy task for teachers to identify and acknowledge each language problem of their learners; thus, learners' cooperation is needed. They are expected to help teachers set expectations of the classroom, possibly by expressing their problems in writing and how they want to be corrected. By doing this, they help teachers to make the right pedagogic decision on error correction methods.

Besides, learners' effort to attentively monitor their own progress is necessary to the success of error correction

process. Learners are encouraged to monitor their progress by paying more attention to their common errors. Learners can take notes of their errors and correction, for instance, on their notebook or error awareness sheet. Then, they can always review what they have read so that they can ask their teachers for help or further practices.

The last, learners' autonomy plays important role for the better result of the process of error correction. Learners' progress depends not only on the teachers' effort, but also on their own. So, learners need to be engaged in the error correction process because it will enhance their language acquisition. This step will lead them to be autonomous learners who are able to self-correct their written work (Gower, Phillips, & Walter, 1995: 165; Xiang, 2004).

### *2.3 Error Correction Methods; Direct and Indirect*

Error correction, whatever the methods, intends to gradually improve the learners' writing awareness and has its ultimate goal to enhance the learners' accuracy in writing. Truscott (1996, cited in Ferris, 2003: 42) emphasizes the goal of error correction for the betterment of students' writing accuracy; so, in order to achieve that purpose, grammatical error correction is emphasized; which is in accordance with Stern's definition of error correction (1992); that it is an inevitable process learners have to go through if they want to learn grammar. This way, Krashen (1987: 11) says, it helps learners to stimulate grammar learning. Richards & Lockhart (1996: 188) add that error correction includes not only grammar; but also, content improvement. To reiterate, error correction is an integral part of learning process to enhance

students' progress.

Seen from the nature of error correction, there are two major methods introduced. Among the methods used in error correction, direct and indirect feedbacks constitute the most important dichotomy (Ferris 2002). Direct feedback, as the title notes, requires the teacher's responsibility to offer the correct forms to learners, whereas indirect feedback involves both teachers and learners in the error correction process, in which teachers indicate the errors and it is learners who correct them (Ferris 2002). Direct correction and coded feedback are two methods which can respectively reflect the main features of direct and indirect feedback.

The first error correction method which is popular in teaching EFL writing is direct feedback. It is an error correction method that directly provides the correct form to learners' errors. The strength of direct correction is that it is less threatening and helpful to low proficiency learners (Ferris, 2002). These students are not yet capable of self-correct; thus, they need remedial guidance which is provided by direct correction. The fact that correct forms are provided is set up for easier revision purposes. However, it can increase learners' dependency on teachers since they might assume that it is just the teachers' responsibility to correct their errors; this way, learners will just copy and the purpose of giving correction will not be achieved (Harmer, 1998 and Hedge, 2000). Since the method does not give learners the opportunity to self-correct (Brannon and Knoblauch, 1982, Sommers, 1982, Zamel, 1985, cited in Ferris 2002: 65), it spoon feeds the learners as they mainly transcribe teachers' correction without

making further attempt to self-correct (Hedge, 2000). Furthermore, it is also possible that teachers might misinterpret learners' original meaning, especially with ambiguous sentence (Ferris, 2002). As opposed to the direct method, indirect feedback has been quite familiar in the EFL teaching writing. Indirect feedback is regarded as "coded error feedback" if the indication of the error is done by a symbol representing a specific kind of *Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi Sayı: 22 Yıl: 2007/1 (397-415 s.)* 400 error (T=verb tense, Sp=spelling) (Lee, 2004). If the indication of the error is done by the kind of error (spelling, verb tense), it is called "uncoded error feedback" (Lee, 2004). For editing a paper with indirect feedback on, the learners are required both to identify the type of errors and to self-correct them (Ferris, 2003).

#### 2.4 Characteristics of Coded Feedback

The following codes in the table are generally used in correcting students' written works as adapted from Lalande's ECCO (in Scott 1996: 103), Harmer (2001), Hogue (1996), and Bartram and Walton (1991).

Types of Errors	Corrective Symbol
1. Tense	T
2. Verb Form	VF
3. Subject Verb Agreement	SV
4. Passive / Active Voice	P/A
5. Singular / Plural	S/P
6. Pronoun	PR
7. Article	Art
8. Wrong Word	VOC
9. Spelling	SPE

10. Word Order	WO
11. Something is missing	Λ
12. Not Clear	?
13. Omit	

Some good characteristics of coded feedback are recognizable due to the learners' writing skill development. First, coded feedback indicates not only where errors are located, but also types of mistakes by using a correcting code (Bartram and Walton, 1991: 8). Thus, the learners will get clue how to deal with the errors. Second, after the teachers and learners are familiar with the codes, this method can actually lessen the correction time. Third, coded feedback makes correction much neater due to the simple and systematic codes (Harmer, 2001). With the precise analysis of the types of errors the learners often produce, the teachers will be able to choose the appropriate follow-up treatment to the typical errors; classifying them and having exact remedial sessions when needed. Fourth, this method involves learners in the self-correction process and helps them learn more effectively (Gower, Phillips & Walters, 1995). Ferris (2002) adds that it arouses learners' responsibility in correction and improves their writing accuracy in the long run. The learners' awareness improves significantly due to the fact that in the process of receiving coded feedback learners are figuring out the correct form of their errors, which is the starting point of language awareness indicated by noticing (Ellis, 1994: 361).

However, several weaknesses of this method cannot be put aside. First drawback is errors which are not

specified in the error correction codes may be ignored, especially idiosyncratic errors (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 1995: 168). Second, it might be threatening for low proficiency learners who are not equipped with the ability for self-correct and confusion might occur when students and teachers are not yet familiar with the codes (Bartram and Walton, 1991 and Ferris, 2002).

### *2.5 Advantages of Coded Feedback*

The first advantage of coded feedback is that it has been proven to significantly reduce treatable errors in writing while it similarly happens in some untreatable cases. In particular, coded feedback reduces the following errors: T, VF, SV, S/P, PR, ^ and NC. According to Ferris (2002: 23), these errors are categorized as treatable because they are related to linguistic structure that occurs in a rule-governed way. It is the result of giving the students opportunities to reflect on and correct their own errors. The Ferris et al. (2000) study, for example, found that learners made substantial progress over a semester in reducing errors in verb tense and form ("treatable"), made slight progress in reducing lexical ("untreatable") and noun ending errors ("treatable"), and regressed in the sentence structure ("untreatable") and article errors categories ("treatable"). Ferris and Roberts (2001) also report a reduction in verb and noun ending errors in text revisions.

The second advantage of coded feedback is that it is very useful for the teachers to classify the learners' common errors. Practically, error codes serve to indicate learners' common errors in grammar, vocabulary and spelling. In real pedagogical situation, when the codes

are designed according to learners' common errors as a class group, follow-up treatment to the learners is visible. It gives the teachers clear perspective on how the class should be guided into. The teachers will have the ability to precisely plan and conduct remedial sessions when needed.

The third advantage of coded feedback is it requires the involvement of both teachers and learners. Coded feedback does not only indicate where errors are located, but also types of mistakes by using correcting codes (Bartram and Walton, 1991: 84). The method demands the teachers to play the role as scholars, who are equipped with knowledge of the target language, to provide correction to learners. Meanwhile, the learners have to actively participate in the process of error correction and reach the objective of self-autonomous. This method involves learners in the self-correction process and helps them learn more effectively (Gower, Phillips & Walters, 1995).

The fourth advantage of coded feedback is that in these two ways (teachers-learners) error correction method, the notion of learners' negative reactions manifest in writing correction can be avoided. When the learners eagerly involve within the process of correction, their passiveness seems to disappear as they are responsible to monitor their own progress. The learners' resistance will gradually vanish as the teachers intend to flexibly apply the coded feedback regarding the learners' level and previous knowledge to decide which errors need immediate attention. The learners' attitude of discouragement which comes from fear of not knowing what to do with the correction given by the teachers, especially when corrections are given

without explanation can be avoided. Coded feedback, in fact, gives clue and direction to the learners to deal with the errors.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, despite the fact that coded feedback has not been proven to lessen untreatable errors, there are many advantages of the implementation of this method in teaching EFL writing. The first advantage is that it is proven to significantly reduce treatable errors in which it will obviously improve awareness and accuracy. The second advantage is that it is helpful for the teachers to classify the learners' common errors. The third advantage is that it requires the active involvement of teachers and learners which lessens the teachers' burden as well as leads into learners' autonomy. The fourth advantage is that it avoids learners' negative reactions manifest in writing correction. Reflected to these, the implementation of coded feedback in EFL learning teaching writing context looks promising.

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