Professors' Feedback Strategies for Correcting Syntactic Errors in EFL Students' Writing: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract— Effective feedback is a cornerstone of second language writing instruction, particularly in addressing syntactic errors that hinder students' linguistic development and communicative competence. This study investigates the strategies employed by university EFL professors to correct syntactic errors in students' written compositions. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve EFL professors from diverse non-native English-speaking university contexts. Data were analysed using thematic coding in NVivo software, revealing four primary feedback strategies: direct correction and explanation, encouragement fostering autonomous learning, individualized feedback tailored to student needs, and varied feedback approaches. The study situates these strategies within the theoretical frameworks of interlanguage theory and error analysis, highlighting their effectiveness in promoting both syntactic accuracy and learner autonomy. Implications for EFL pedagogy, curriculum design, and teacher training programs are discussed, emphasizing the importance of adaptive, student-centered feedback practices.

Keywords— EFL writing, syntactic errors, feedback strategies, qualitative research, university professors

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing in a foreign language is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for learners, particularly at the university level. Among the difficulties learners face, syntactic errors—such as incorrect word order, subject-verb agreement errors, tense misuse, and misapplication of grammatical rules—are especially pervasive and can significantly impede communication and comprehension (Ellis, 2008; Ferris, 2010). These errors often stem from first language interference, limited exposure to target language syntax, and developmental stages in learners' interlanguage systems (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972).

University students are expected to write academically with a high degree of grammatical accuracy, which makes the role of instructors' feedback particularly crucial. Feedback serves not only to correct errors but also to guide learners in developing self-monitoring and autonomous writing skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Previous studies have shown that effective feedback contributes to improved syntactic competence, increased motivation, and higher writing

confidence among EFL students (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Liu & Brown, 2015).

Despite the importance of feedback, there is considerable variation in how professors provide it. Differences arise from teaching experience, disciplinary context, cultural expectations, and pedagogical beliefs, leading to diverse strategies in error correction (Hyland, 2003; Ferris, 2011). Understanding these strategies is essential for informing teacher training programs, improving feedback practices, and ultimately enhancing students' writing performance.

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What feedback strategies do university EFL professors employ to correct syntactic errors in student writing?

2. How do professors adapt their feedback to individual learners' needs?

3. What are the perceived challenges and benefits associated with these feedback strategies?

By exploring these questions through a qualitative lens, this study seeks to provide insights into effective feedback practices that can be generalized across non-native English-speaking university contexts.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Syntactic Errors in EFL Writing

Syntactic errors are common in EFL learners' written compositions and reflect developmental and interlanguage processes (Corder, 1967). Such errors include incorrect verb tense, subject-verb agreement, article misuse, preposition errors, and word order violations. Persistent syntactic errors can reduce the clarity, coherence, and academic quality of writing, which underscores the need for effective corrective feedback (Ferris, 2010).

Several studies highlight the influence of L1 interference in producing syntactic errors. For instance, learners whose first language has different word order structures often struggle with English sentence construction (Odlin, 1989). Additionally, learner errors may result from overgeneralization of grammatical rules, developmental stages in second language acquisition, or insufficient exposure to authentic language input (Ellis, 2008).

2.2. The Role of Feedback in Writing Instruction

Feedback is broadly defined as information provided to learners regarding their performance, intended to improve future outcomes (Shute, 2008). In EFL writing, feedback can be corrective, focusing on identifying and rectifying errors, or facilitative, aimed at promoting self-regulated learning and critical reflection. Corrective feedback can be **direct**, offering explicit corrections, or **indirect**, signaling errors and encouraging learners to self-correct (Ferris, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008).

Research shows that feedback effectiveness depends on its timing, clarity, and alignment with learners' proficiency levels. Immediate feedback is more effective for persistent errors, whereas delayed feedback can promote self-assessment skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback also interacts with learner motivation; positive, constructive feedback enhances engagement, whereas overly critical feedback can demotivate students (Liu & Brown, 2015)

2.3. Professors' Feedback Strategies

Professors employ a variety of feedback strategies in EFL writing classrooms. **Direct correction and explanation** are commonly used for frequent or systematic errors, providing learners with clear models of correct usage (Ferris, 2011). **Encouragement and facilitation** support autonomous learning, prompting students to reflect on their mistakes and develop self-correction skills (Vygotsky,

1978). **Individualized feedback** involves adapting correction to students' specific needs, considering factors such as language proficiency, prior knowledge, and learning style (Hyland, 2003).

Empirical studies highlight the benefits of **varied feedback approaches**, combining written comments, oral discussion, peer feedback, and digital tools to reinforce learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Li & Li, 2020). However, challenges remain, including managing large class sizes, balancing accuracy and fluency, and addressing diverse learner expectations.

2.4. Feedback and Learner Motivation

Motivation is a key factor influencing how students respond to feedback. Studies indicate that students are more likely to act on feedback when it is constructive, supportive, and aligned with their goals (Dörnyei, 2001). Professors who combine correction with encouragement can foster positive attitudes toward writing, increase self-efficacy, and promote persistence in language learning (Ushioda, 2011).

III.   METHODOLOGY

3.1.   Research Objectives

To identify and describe the different feedback strategies used by university EFL professors to correct syntactic errors in students' written compositions.

To examine how EFL professors adapt their feedback approaches to address the individual needs, proficiency levels, and learning styles of their students.

To explore and analyze the perceived challenges and pedagogical benefits associated with various feedback strategies in the context of EFL writing instruction.

3.2. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate professors' feedback strategies. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture rich, detailed insights into their practices, allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their approaches and reasoning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3.Participants

Twelve university EFL professors participated, representing various non-native English-speaking universities. Participants were purposively selected based on teaching experience (5–20 years) and expertise in teaching academic writing. Six participants were male, and six were female. Disciplines taught included linguistics, literature, and general EFL courses.

3.4. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via online video conferencing, lasting 45–60 minutes. Questions focused on feedback strategies for syntactic errors, rationale behind chosen methods, adaptation to learner needs, and perceived effectiveness. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.5. Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software. Open coding identified initial categories, which were refined into four main themes: direct correction and explanation, encouragement fostering autonomous learning, individualized feedback, and varied feedback strategies. Sub-themes were developed to capture nuances, such as types of direct feedback, levels of autonomy promotion, and methods of tailoring feedback.

3.6. Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants for validation. Peer debriefing was used to reduce researcher bias. Dependability was enhanced through detailed documentation of coding and thematic analysis.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing names and institutions. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for human subject's research.

IV.   RESULTS

4.1. Direct Correction and Explanation

Professors frequently employed direct correction, particularly for recurring or critical syntactic errors. Sub-themes included:

- **Explicit correction with rule explanation:** "I highlight incorrect verb forms and explain the tense rules, so students understand why it is wrong."

- **Error modeling:** Providing model sentences to demonstrate correct syntax.

- **Immediate versus delayed correction:** Some professors corrected in real-time during tutorials, while others returned annotated assignments.

4.2. Encouragement and Autonomous Learning

Encouraging self-correction was emphasized to foster autonomy:

- **Prompting reflection:** Students were asked to identify and correct errors themselves.

- **Resource guidance:** Professors recommended grammar guides and online tools.

- **Balancing support and independence:** "I avoid giving the answer immediately; instead, I guide them to the solution."

4.3. Individualized Feedback

Feedback was adapted to student proficiency, motivation, and prior performance:

- **Differentiated detail levels:** Novice writers received more detailed explanations; advanced learners received concise prompts.

- **Personalized examples:** Professors used student-specific sentences to illustrate corrections.

- **Addressing recurring patterns:** Focused feedback on repeated error types.

4.4. Varied Feedback Strategies

Professors used multiple modalities:

- **Written annotations:** Highlighted errors with marginal notes.

- **Oral feedback:** One-on-one sessions allowed immediate clarification.

- **Peer-assisted review:** Encouraged collaborative error detection and correction.

- **Digital feedback:** Some professors used online platforms to provide interactive corrections.

V.   DISCUSSION

The study highlights that effective feedback in EFL writing is multi-dimensional, combining direct correction with autonomy-promoting strategies. Direct feedback supports accuracy, while facilitative approaches develop self-regulation. Individualized and varied feedback enhances engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.

Findings align with prior research emphasizing the need for adaptive, context-sensitive feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). Professors' strategic blending of correction types demonstrates professional judgment, balancing error correction with learner autonomy.

The study also illustrates practical challenges, such as time constraints, diverse student proficiency levels, and large class sizes. Addressing these challenges requires teacher training programs to focus on feedback literacy, enabling professors to deliver effective, efficient, and learner-centered feedback.

VI.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined EFL professors' feedback strategies for correcting syntactic errors, identifying four main approaches: direct correction, autonomy encouragement, individualized feedback, and varied strategies. Effective feedback requires flexibility, responsiveness, and a balance between explicit instruction and learner independence.

Recommendations:

1. Combine direct and indirect feedback to balance accuracy and autonomy.

2. Tailor feedback to individual learners' proficiency and needs.

3. Encourage self-reflection and resource use to promote autonomous learning.

4. Utilize multiple feedback modalities to accommodate diverse learning styles.

Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of these strategies on syntactic development, cross-cultural differences in feedback, and integration of technology-enhanced feedback tools.

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