Enhancing the Effectiveness of Focused Corrective Feedback on L2 English Learners’ Written Texts

Att förhöja effektiviteten av fokuserad korrektiv återkoppling på texter av L-2 engelskelever.

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Abstract

Studies have shown that accuracy of L2 writing is improved when teachers employ direct corrective feedback (CF). Less is known about the benefits of adding some form of metalinguistic explanation to the focused direct CF.

In this study, thirty-six grade nine students from two different schools in Sweden completed two sets of written tasks, one week apart. All of the students’ work was corrected using focused direct CF, with only one linguistic feature (the accurate use of the present simple and the present continuous) being the primary focus. Some of the students also received an oral metalinguistic explanation in the form of a class lecture, while others received a written, personalised metalinguistic explanation. Eleven students were subsequently interviewed.

The study showed that all of the students appreciated the CF that they received and the vast majority thought that it had helped them, even if their results did not reflect this. The students who received focused direct corrective feedback with an oral explanation in the form of a class lecture showed the most consistent improvement overall.

Key Words: error correction, corrective feedback (CF), present simple, present continuous, second language acquisition (SLA), L1, L2
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1 Introduction

There has been an enormous amount of debate over the past twenty years as to the usefulness and efficacy of corrective feedback in second language (L2) acquisition. Sparked by Scott Truscott’s assertion in 1996 that all grammar correction in L2 writing classes was “ineffective” and not “helpful in any interesting sense” (p. 327), innumerable studies have been undertaken to prove him wrong. Just as making errors is a natural part of the language acquisition process, so too is error correction considered to be important and necessary by most language teachers and students. Many of the studies that have been undertaken in the last twenty years confirm this long held belief, and a number of them point to a specific form of corrective feedback – focused direct CF - as being superior to others when applied to a student’s written work.

In my eight-year experience as an English language teacher in Sweden, I have seen this to be true. Over the years, I have alternated between circling an error but not providing the correct answer, to crossing out a mistake and providing the correction. Overwhelmingly, my students respond better to having their work corrected by me, and I can see positive results in their subsequent writing. However, I have often wondered whether the students can truly learn if they don’t know the reason why their choice was incorrect. Because of this, I have occasionally added a metalinguistic explanation to my corrections, but I am not convinced that it has served any purpose or whether the added effort has merely been a waste of my time.

In this study, I intend to examine whether adding a metalinguistic explanation to focused direct corrective feedback of a student’s writing enhances the overall effect of the feedback, and if so, whether oral metalinguistic feedback or personalised metalinguistic feedback is most beneficial. In order for me to clearly see the results of my CF, I believe that it would be simpler, and ultimately, more comprehensible if I focused on a distinct but common type of mistake, frequently made by Swedish learners of English. After reviewing my students’ most persistent mistakes, I have determined that the misapplication of the continuous tense, and specifically the present continuous, is a perfect area on which to focus my direct corrective feedback.
1.1 Problem

Making mistakes when learning a new language is unavoidable. An error, according to Yule (2010) “is not something that hinders a student’s progress, but is probably a clue to the active learning process being made by a student as he or she tries out ways of communicating in the new language” (p. 191). The challenge for a language teacher is being able to turn these natural errors into learning opportunities, without discouraging the student. In order to do this, some form of corrective feedback may be necessary.

Recent studies (Chandler 2003, Ferris 2006, Sheen 2007, Bitchener and Knoch 2008) have demonstrated that when dealing with written texts, focused CF produces the most positive results. That is, when a teacher corrects a student’s work by providing the correct form, the student tends to incorporate those corrections into future work. However, there are few studies which focus on whether additional or complimentary forms of CF could enhance the effectiveness of focused corrective feedback. This is precisely what my study has set out to determine.

As noted by Sheen (2007), the most effective way to measure the impact of written CF is by isolating a single linguistic element of a student’s writing and focusing all feedback on that component (p. 262). To this end, I have decided to concentrate on the English present tense, focusing on the application of the simple present and the present continuous. The absence of the continuous (also called progressive) tense in Swedish can cause problems for Swedish learners of English, and often leads to misuse or overuse (Vannestål, 2007; Axelsson & Hahn, 2001). Without a proper understanding of the concept of continuous action, and the ability to differentiate it from that of repeated or completed actions, it is very hard for Swedish learners of English to confidently employ either form of the present tense in English.
1.2 What is Corrective Feedback?

Corrective Feedback is a term used in applied linguistics to describe the various strategies a teacher may use to correct a student’s writing. Ellis (2009) identifies five different methods for providing corrective feedback: Direct CF, Indirect CF, Metalinguistic CF, Electronic Feedback, and Reformulation (p. 98). Ellis also pays attention to the focus of the feedback (unfocused/focused):

1. **Direct CF**: the teacher provides the student with the correct form.
2. **Indirect CF**: the teacher indicates that an error exists, but does not provide the correction. The teacher may either underline the actual errors or place a notation in the margin indicating that an error or errors are present in that line.
3. **Metalinguistic CF**: the teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error. The teacher may write codes in the margin (ww=wrong word; art=article, etc.) or the teacher numbers the errors and writes a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the text.
4. **Electronic Feedback**: the teacher indicates an error and provides a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage.
5. **Reformulation**: a native speaker reworks the student’s entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while preserving the original content.

   - **The focus of the feedback**: this concerns whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the student’s errors (unfocused CF) or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct (focused CF). **Note**: focused and unfocused CF are not methods, but rather techniques applied to Direct, Indirect and Metalinguistic CF.

Ellis also notes that in order for any type of CF to work, it is important that the student addresses the errors. A teacher can either require revision by having the student correct the mistakes, or require no revision by having the student study the mistakes or merely be handed back a corrected text (p. 99).
1.3 The Present Tense

Tense in English and Swedish is very similar. Every tense that exists in Swedish, also exists in English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swedish Tense</th>
<th>English Tense</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Jag tränar; I practise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preteritum</td>
<td>Simple Past</td>
<td>Jag tränade; I practised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futurum</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Jag ska träna/jag kommer att träna; I will practice/I am going to practise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfekt</td>
<td>Present perfect</td>
<td>Jag har tränat; I have practised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluskvamperfekt</td>
<td>Past Perfect</td>
<td>Jag hade tränat; I had practised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futurum Exactum</td>
<td>Future Perfect</td>
<td>Jag ska ha tränt; I will have practised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konditionalis I</td>
<td>Conditional II</td>
<td>Jag skulle träna; I would practise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konditionalis II</td>
<td>Conditional III</td>
<td>Jag skulle ha tränt; I would have practised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – English and Swedish Tenses

There is, however, one tense that exists in English that does not exist in Swedish: the continuous tense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuous Tense</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present Continuous</td>
<td>I am practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Continuous</td>
<td>I was practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Continuous</td>
<td>I will be practicing/I am going to be practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Perfect Continuous</td>
<td>I have been practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Perfect Continuous</td>
<td>I had been practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Perfect Continuous</td>
<td>I will have been practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional Continuous I</td>
<td>found in an &quot;if&quot; clause; resembles future continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you need me, I will be practicing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional Continuous II</td>
<td>I would be practising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional Continuous II</td>
<td>I would have been practising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – English Conditional Tense

According to Maria Vannestål (2007), since there is no corresponding form of the continuous tense in Swedish, native Swedish speakers tend to use constructions such as **håller på att...**, **ligger/sitter/stå och...** to illustrate the progressive aspect of an action.
Consequently, many native Swedish speakers tend to overuse the continuous tense when speaking English.

1.4 Purpose of Study

My study will seek to answer three questions:

1. Can focused direct corrective feedback be enhanced or improved upon by adding metalinguistic explanations, and if so, which form of metalinguistic explanation is most beneficial?
2. Can young Swedish learners of English explain their reasons for choosing to employ the present simple rather than the present continuous and vice versa?
3. How do Swedish learners of English perceive the effectiveness of focused direct corrective feedback?
2 Background

The underlying assumption in my study is that corrective feedback of written texts is beneficial to the student and promotes L2 acquisition. As noted by Hyland and Hyland (2006), both teachers and students overwhelmingly believe that direct feedback is useful and effective in aiding L2 acquisition. Nevertheless, for most students and teachers, this view is largely based on personal experience and not scientific evidence. Students instinctively feel that there is a value to having their mistakes corrected and similarly, teachers instinctively feel that their corrections are both helpful and necessary. As with most “gut feelings,” this notion is not something often questioned.

However, an article published in 1996 by John Truscott entitled “The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes” changed all of that. Truscott asserted that all forms of CF applied to L2 student writing were not only useless, but could be detrimental to L2 acquisition and should be abandoned (p. 328). He said that the “intuitive” belief held amongst language teachers and students that corrective feedback had value was a dangerous fallacy (p. 341). He noted that just because students want to have corrective feedback is not reason enough to give it to them; a teacher’s main responsibility towards a student is to aid them in their learning, not to acquiesce to their demands. Because providing corrective feedback on their writing does not help them, it should not be done. (p. 358). Truscott cited a number of studies that he claimed supported his argument.

Truscott’s article triggered a rebuttal by Ferris (1999) and sparked a huge debate amongst researchers in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language (L2) writing. One of the results of this debate was to recognise that although many researchers believed CF to be an invaluable element for improving L2 student writing, there was little supporting research in this area. Furthermore, according to Bitchener (2009), the limited research that did exist at that time was either flawed to some extent or misleading. He believed that it was difficult to properly assess the findings of many earlier studies because the approach to the research was largely unfocused (p. 204). As Chandler (2003) noted, “The one implicit point of agreement in Truscott and Ferris’ articles was that the existing data are insufficient to resolve the question of whether error correction can be an effective way to improve the accuracy of L2 writing (p. 268). Clearly, more research was needed in this area.
Since the publication of Truscott’s article, there has been a focused effort by researchers to correct the apparent deficit of data and produce accurate and reliable results. This flurry of research has resulted in a variety of studies concentrating on many different aspects of corrective feedback. Some studies focused on accurate revision of L2 student writing (Chandler 2003; Ferris 2006), others on the relationships teachers form with their students when they give feedback (Bates, Lane & Lange 1993), or student views on teacher feedback (Radecki & Swales 1988; Leki 1991; Ferris 1995), or the effectiveness of oral feedback (Thonus 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004), peer response (Zamel 1985; Mittan 1989) and self evaluation (Brinko 1993).

Recent studies (Chandler 2003; Ferris 2004, 2006, 2010; Bitchener et al 2005; Sheen 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener and Knoch 2008, 2009, 2010; Ellis et al 2008; Ellis 2009) have concentrated on determining the effect of corrective feedback on L2 student writing. While some researchers, most notably Ferris, have concluded that indirect error correction produces improvement in L2 writing, there is substantial evidence that suggests that direct error correction on L2 student writing produces more lasting results (Chandler 2003; Bitchener et al 2005; Ellis et al 2008; Bitchener and Knoch 2008). In her study, Chandler (2003) found that students who were given direct corrective feedback by the teacher showed measurable improvements in subsequent writing. She hypothesised that,

Perhaps when ESL students can see their errors corrected soon after writing, they internalise the correct form better. Perhaps the greater cognitive effort expended in making their own corrections is offset by the additional delay in knowing whether their own hypothesised correction was in fact accurate. (p. 291)

Chandler’s findings were supported by Sheen (2007) who found that direct corrective feedback produced positive results by improving the accuracy of L2 student writing in subsequent assignments. Sheen further found that students who had received both direct corrective feedback and a metalinguistic comment had better results than those students who received direct corrective feedback without any additional metalinguistic comments. Sheen explained this result by suggesting that the students who received an explanation of their error developed useful insight into their own language acquisition:
Thus, it can be argued that whereas both direct CF with and without metalinguistic comments are likely to promote awareness and noticing, only direct CF with metalinguistic comments promotes awareness with understanding. (p. 275)

Like Han (2002) and Iwashita (2003) before her, Sheen focused her direct CF on one linguistic aspect of her students’ writing. In her study, Sheen limited her corrections to errors involving the articles *a* and *the*. The choice to narrow the focus of the feedback to one linguistic aspect of the students’ writing was in response to the misleading results of previous, unfocused studies. Bitchener and Knoch (2008) theorised that when teachers corrected every linguistic mistake in a written text, students could become overwhelmed trying to process all of the information. This “cognitive overload” hindered the students’ understanding of their errors and had a negative effect on learning (p. 205). By narrowing the focus of correction to one specific aspect in a student’s writing, the researchers were able to avoid flooding their students with countless revisions and allowed them to concentrate on a specific improvement.

Today, there is a comparatively large amount of data attesting to the value of corrective feedback on the overall accuracy of L2 student writing, and a growing amount of research pointing to direct corrective feedback as a superior form of CF. Unfortunately, the results of these studies have not filtered down to the classroom and been put into practice by ESL teachers (Lee 2013). In her studies of ESL teachers (2004, 2008, 2010), Lee has observed that even though there is ample evidence proving the value of a focused approach to corrective feedback, many teachers still persist in meticulously correcting every mistake in a student’s writing, in an unfocused manner. According to Lee, this is due to several factors, including the intrinsic belief held by many teachers that all CF is beneficial to students; these same beliefs are held by parents and students. Lee observes that teachers therefore feel an obligation to their students (and ultimately to the parents) to prove their dedication and diligence through administering exhaustive CF.
3 Method

For this study, I selected thirty-six grade nine students from two different schools in Skanör, Sweden. Of the thirty-six students, three were sixteen years old, thirty-one were fifteen years old, and two were fourteen years old. In total, twenty-three girls and thirteen boys participated in the study. All of the students had Swedish as their mother tongue, except two of the sixteen-year-old students, who came from Lithuania and Afghanistan respectively. Two of the fifteen-year-old students were absent from the second task in the study so their contributions were not calculated in the final results.

The study involved having the students complete two sets of tests, one week apart. Each set of tests consisted of one translation task and one written task. The two translation tasks were very similar in structure and content. They each had a sentence, which began with “at the moment”, and a sentence that described something that “always” happens. These two phrases were included to assess that the student understood the concept that “right now” requires the present continuous and “always” requires the simple present. The written task asked the students to choose a picture from two provided and describe what was happening in that picture. The idea was that the student would naturally describe the picture in the present tense.

All of the students completed the first two tasks at various times during the same week. I personally administered the tests to all of the students involved. The translation task was administered first and when it was complete, it was collected and the writing task was administered.

After the students completed both tests, I divided the tests into three groups of twelve: Groups 1, 2 and 3. Group 1 would receive focused direct CF plus an oral metalinguistic explanation; Group 2 would receive focused direct CF plus a personalised metalinguistic explanation; Group 3 would receive focused direct CF only. I then corrected all the tests by using focused direct CF: I crossed out the verb error with a red line and provided the correct form above it. For Group 2, I added a personalised, line for line explanation of each error.

1 I did not correct any other language errors that may have been present, such as with spelling or vocabulary. The CF was focused exclusively on the student’s ability to correctly employ either the simple present or the present continuous.
On Monday morning of the following week, I handed back the corrected work (and metalinguistic explanations in the case of Group 2) to the students. I asked all of the students to study their errors and any explanations they may have received. I then met with Group 1 and held a 30-minute lecture on the simple present and the present continuous, wherein I explained the theory behind the two tenses and used both the translation and writing tasks as examples. At the end of the week (on both Thursday and Friday), I administered the second set of tests, which again consisted of a translation task and a writing task. I then corrected this second set of tests and compared the results of each student’s tests to their first set, and looked for improvements.

Finally, I conducted short interviews with a selection of the students from each group. I asked them three questions:

1. When should you use the present simple and when should you use the present continuous?
2. Why did you choose this form of the verb?
3. What did you think of my feedback?

The interviews were held a few weeks after the tests had been administered, following the Christmas break.
4 Results

In both of the translation tasks, all of the students made at least one mistake when employing either the simple present or the present continuous.

After administering the first set of tests, it was clear that students had attempted to use the present continuous in the translation task. However, in the free writing many avoided it by using different constructions, such as employing a present participle, instead of a verb. There are numerous examples from the students’ writing: “There are fans holding up their cameras...” as opposed to “Fans are holding up their cameras; “You can see a lot of people trying to take a picture...” as opposed to “A lot of people are trying...”; “There are a lot of people around him taking pictures” as oppose to “People around him are taking pictures”; “I see Johnny Depp walking...” as opposed to “Johnny Depp is walking...”

There were also many examples of students who overused the present continuous by employing it instead of the present simple. They wrote “is having Spiderman clothes,” “is coming from New York,” “he is always fighting,” “this picture is describing,” “Obama is having his hands up,” instead of “has on Spiderman clothes,” “comes from New York,” “he always fights,” “this pictures describes,” “Obama has his hands up.”

Furthermore, many students chose to say things such as “the little child has a Spiderman suit on” instead of “the little child is wearing a Spiderman suit...” This was another way in which the continuous was cleverly avoided in the free writing. Nevertheless, in the first set of tests, the free writing task was generally done much better than the translation task. Students made much fewer mistakes on average in the texts that they wrote themselves when compared to the set text of the translation task.

4.1 Focused direct CF plus an oral metalinguistic explanation (Group 1)

The second set of tests was analysed to see if any noticeable improvement had taken place. Of the twelve participants in Group 1 who had received both direct CF and a 30-minute lecture on the present tense, eight showed improvement in the translation task, while four showed no improvement. No real measurable improvement was evident in the writing task.
In the translation task, improvement was most notable in the sentence “För närvarande bor han i Oxford.” In the first translation task, all students except one translated this as “At the moment he lives in Oxford.” This was corrected in the second task to “At the moment he is living in Oxford.” However, many of the same people incorrectly used the continuous with the “always” phrase in Task 2, even if they had had it correct in Task 1. The sentence from Task 1 “Rupert bråkar alltid med Nick” and Task 2 “Rupert klagar alltid på Nicks musik” both require the simple present because this is a repeated action, as indicated by the word “always.” Interestingly, many who had correctly employed the simple present in the first task incorrectly employed the present continuous in the second task.

In the writing task, the students who used the continuous correctly in Task 1 continued to do so, and the students who relied on present participles or clever structure to avoid the using the continuous, also continued to do so. Some examples of this are “I see Katniss Everdeen drawing her bow,” “There are a lot of people around him taking pictures,” and “The picture shows Katniss aiming with a bow.”

4.2 Focused direct CF with a personalised metalinguistic explanation (Group 2)

Of the eleven participants who completed both tasks in Group 2 and who had received both direct CF and a personalised metalinguistic explanation, only one student showed consistent improvement throughout the task, while six students showed some improvement in one aspect of the translation task but also showed a clear decline in another aspect; four students showed no improvement.

The six students who showed some improvement tended to correct the “at the moment” sentence by correctly employing the present continuous, where they had used the simple present in Task 1. However, many then overused the continuous in the rest of the exercise, placing it incorrectly in the “always” sentence, for instance. An example of this can be seen where a student states that, “For now he’s living in Oxford,” (correct) but goes on to say “Rupert is always complaining on Nick’s music” (incorrect). This same student wrote in Task 1, “For now he lives in Oxford” (incorrect), but “Rupert always fights with Nick” (correct).

Three students in Group 2 showed improvement in the free writing portion of
the test. For instance, in the first task, one student wrote incorrectly, “’The president and the little kid play a game” and “Spiderman says ‘Hey, you!’” In the second task, the same student wrote correctly, “I see two persons who is (sic) playing soccer” and “It looks like Zlatan is shouting or saying anything, but who knows?”

4.3 Focused direct CF (Group 3)

Of the eleven participants who completed both tasks in Group 3 and had received focused direct CF only, five showed some improvement on the translation task while seven showed no improvement. One student improved on the writing task.

In the translation task, several students improved upon sentences that described actions that were taking place “right now.” Where in Task 1 they used the simple present, “right now, he sits/reads/studies,” a similar sentence was written in the present continuous in Task 2, “right now, he is laying/playing/singing,” which was an improvement.

In the writing task, one student showed clear improvement. Where in the first writing task the student had described what Obama was wearing in the simple present “Obama wears a black suit”, the student amended a similar description in the second task by correctly using the present continuous and writing “She is wearing a brown jacket; she is holding a bow.”

4.4 Interviews

After the tests, I conducted eleven oral interviews with four students from Groups 1 and 3 and three students from Group 2 respectively. I chose students whose answers in the second task were clearly different from those in the first task, but not necessarily showing improvement. That is, the student may have used the present simple correctly in the first task “He comes from London”, but changed a similar sentence incorrectly to the present continuous in the second task “He is coming from New York.” Other students showed clear improvement, correctly employing both the present simple and the present continuous in the second task more than they had in the first task. I chose these particular students because I wanted some insight into whether or not they had consciously changed their answers in the second task, and if so, if it was influenced by
the feedback they had received. I did not believe that I could get this insight from students who had similar answers in both tasks.

In the first question, the students who were in Groups 2 and 3 and hadn’t received the oral lecture were confused by the terms “present continuous” vs. “present simple.” When I rephrased the question and asked them “When do you say, “I talk” and when do you say, “I am talking?” (or “eat/eating”), eight of the eleven students could explain the present continuous as something that is done “right now.” Nevertheless, almost all of the students had a very hard time explaining the present simple, regardless of their group. Many of their responses, regardless of if they were correct or not, indicated uncertainty:

“The continuous is when I do it right now, I guess, and the present simple one – oh how was it? I don’t remember.” (Group 1)

“‘ing’ is right now. No “ing” – is that present? I don’t know. I understand, but it’s difficult to explain. It just sounds weird in my head.” (Group 3)

“I can explain “ing” but not the other. “‘ing” is when you’re doing it right now and “I eat” is like, in the future, right?” (Group 3)

In the second question, many of the eleven students had a very hard time explaining why they chose a particular form of a verb. Many pointed towards a gut feeling rather than a conscious application of theory:

“I think it just made sense. It came to my mind like that (snaps fingers).” (Group 3)

“I don’t really know why I did it. Maybe it was just something that I just wrote without thinking twice.” (Group 3)

“It just sounds right! It sounds better to have “ing.” I don’t know why I didn’t do it the first time. Can’t remember really.” (Group 3)

Seven of the eleven students referenced the feedback as a motivating factor in why they chose a specific form of the verb in Task 2. Nevertheless, the verb forms they chose were not always correct.

“I improved because I practised on that “ing” for right now. I looked on the test
and read it and saw my mistakes.” (Group 1)

“You gave me that paper and it refreshed my mind. I wasn’t really thinking about what I wrote in the first test but in the second one, I was thinking about what was right.” (Group 1)

“I looked over my paper and realised how I should do it. So I just learned by the comments.” (Group 3)

In the third question, all eleven students believed that the feedback was good, regardless of the form they received it in. Even those students who were confused by the feedback or didn’t apply it correctly felt it was valuable:

“It was good. It showed me which form was to be at which place, but when I wrote it, I was “slarvig.” (English: sloppy/careless) It depends on me to learn the feedback. If I can see the errors, I can take it with me and not do it again.” (Group 1)

“I thought it was good because it told me exactly what was wrong and I could focus on it. I thought it helped me.” (Group 2)

“I liked having the oral explanation. If you hadn’t explained, I think I wouldn’t have understood why it was that way.” (Group 3)

Only one student wished to have different feedback than what was given. Interestingly, that student had been in the group that received direct CF only, without any form of metalinguistic feedback:

“The feedback was good. I liked it. But I would’ve liked it better if you had told me what was wrong - had it explained it - so that I would know how to do it next time. It would make it easier.” (Group 3)
5 Analysis and Discussion

The choice to use students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen was mostly due to the fact that I have access to students of this age through my job as a middle school English teacher. However, I was certainly cognisant of the fact that this is an ideal age for L2 acquisition. According to Yule, children between the ages of ten and sixteen are optimally positioned for effective L2 learning in the classroom. In essence, they are young enough for their language acquisition capabilities to still be developing, but mature enough to possess cognitive skills that allow “a more effective analysis of the regular features of the L2 being learned” (p.188). Students at this age are as open and receptive to L2 acquisition as younger children are, but have the added ability of being able to reflect on their own learning.

It is interesting to note that, on average, the students in this study made significantly fewer mistakes in the self-generated texts than in the translations. The obvious reason for this would be that students used words and phrases that they were comfortable with and had employed successfully in the past. The fact that many students chose to use constructions that closely mirrored Swedish (L1), such as employing a present participle to indicate an on-going action, shows a developing level of linguistic competence and is, according to Yule, a fundamental communicative strategy for L2 acquisition. Yule observed that L2 learners may personalise their communication by using constructions that may not be a natural choice for a native speaker, but noted that “(t)his flexibility in L2 use is a key element in communicative success” (p. 194). The use of strategies such as these in L2 acquisition are recognised and valued in the Swedish school system. The Swedish Board of Education (Skolverket) has included a knowledge requirement (kunskapskrav) in the Swedish curriculum for foreign languages, including English, that teachers assess students on their ability “to use language strategies to understand and make themselves understood” (“använda språkliga strategier för att förstå och göra sig förstådda”) (Skolverket).

While the self-generated texts were generally done better than the translations, there were still a few students who chose to over-employ the present continuous in their free writing. While this could also be recognised as a communicative strategy, it is not a successful one, nor should it be encouraged. The incorrect application of the continuous tense makes the overall text less comprehensible to a native speaker. This
tendency towards overuse of the continuous tense by L2 learners is a recognised phenomenon in L2 acquisition research (Axelsson & Hahn, 2001; Vannestål, 2007). Although many of the phrases where the continuous tense is misapplied may not be strictly incorrect, Axelsson & Hahn (2001) found that their meaning becomes “ambiguous” (p.25). Ambiguity in language is not something that is desirable for L2 learners, who should be striving for accuracy and coherence.

Many who had correctly employed the simple present in the first task incorrectly employed the present continuous in the second. This was especially prevalent in Group 1 and may be a result of the lecture that Group 1 attended. In the lecture, the present simple and the present continuous were discussed in general terms. Students who asked specific questions relating to their work received personalised oral metalinguistic feedback on their work. The fact that some students who had correctly employed the present simple in the first task chose to use the present continuous in the second task was interesting. I suspect it stemmed directly from my lecture. Although I didn’t use the translation task in my lesson, I did discuss the fact that doing something “right now” requires the continuous, and that there is a difference between “I work” and “I am working” and “I live” and “I am living.” These two verbs are, in my experience, the most often employed incorrectly and consequently, they are the ones I most often use as examples. Because the same verb (live/living) was in the both translation tasks, the fact that I specifically mentioned it in my lecture may be why almost every student had it correct in the second translation task. However, the subsequent overuse of the present continuous – even in instances where the students had it correct in the first task – may indicate that many students didn’t actually understand why they were selecting the verb form they did. When I asked certain students about this, all said that they used the continuous in the first sentence “for the moment, he is living in Oxford” because it was occurring “right now.” However, when they subsequently failed to use the present simple in a sentence with “always” (“Rupert always complains…”), it was clear to me that they hadn’t completely understood the theory behind the application, or at the minimum, they had only understood the “right now” application of the continuous.

Nevertheless, Group 1 still showed greater overall improvement in the translation task than the other two groups. Eight out of twelve students made more than one improvement – even if a few of the students also made errors they had not made in the first translation task. The self-generated writing showed little to no improvement,
however. The students who used the continuous correctly in the first free writing task continued to do so, and the students who relied on present participles or another structure to avoid using the continuous, also continued to do so. This suggests that the students viewed the oral metalinguistic feedback as more relevant to the translation task than their own free writing. That is, they thought about and applied the rules discussed during the lecture to specific mistakes they had made in first translation task. Many of these students had successfully employed communicative strategies in their self-generated writing, either by using words and phrases (including the present simple and the present continuous) that they were comfortable with or by avoiding using the continuous altogether by employing present participles to show on going action. Therefore they focused their improvements on the translation task, as it was where they had the most mistakes.

It is quite interesting that none of the students in Group 1 applied their recently refreshed knowledge of the present tense to their free writing. This could suggest that the students were comfortable with the strategies they used when writing. In the follow up interviews, many students indicated that they didn’t think about verb forms when they wrote and instead relied on instinct. Or there could be another explanation: I was only focusing on the present tense and not correcting any other errors in their writing, so many of the students’ texts appeared to be “error free.” I have yet to meet a student who will independently change a seemingly “perfect” paper. It is quite possible that those students who received their unchanged texts back saw the lack of corrections as a confirmation that the strategies they were using were working and resolved to continue in this vein. This corresponds to what Sachs and Polio observed in their own study, that students who notice an error are more likely to correct that error (p. 88). Conversely, we can assume that students who believe there is no error present will logically not look for one.

While Group 1 was clearly superior in the translation task, Group 2 had the most students who showed improvement in the free writing task. Three of the eleven students made significant (more than one) improvements on their self-generated texts, while no students in Group 1 and only one student in group 3 showed any form of improvement. Additionally, Group 2 had a fair number (six) of students who showed some improvement on the translation task. This could suggest that personalised metalinguistic feedback is better for overall improvement of L2 student writing. This is precisely what Sheen (2007) concluded from her study: direct CF that focused on one
or two linguistic features, coupled with a metalinguistic explanation, produced the overall best results on L2 student writing (p. 278). Nevertheless, a much longer study than mine would need to be undertaken to truly confirm the long term benefits of this type of CF on L2 student writing.

Furthermore, when Group 2’s improvements were analysed closely, it was apparent that, unlike Group 1, almost all of the students who made some improvements in their translations, also made as many mistakes. That is to say that while there was evidence of improvement in Group 2’s translations, there was also a noticeable amount of decline. This type of inconsistent development clearly differentiates Group 2 from Group 1. While some improvement is clearly evident in Group 2’s translations, the lack of consistency casts doubt on its sustainability and the value of the CF. Moreover, while Sheen’s results point towards focused direct CF with a metalinguistic explanation being the best form of CF for L2 student writing, it must be pointed out that Sheen did not offer oral metalinguistic feedback in her study. The fact that the students in my study responded with more consistent and accurate improvements when they received focused direct CF with oral metalinguistic feedback, may suggest that this is the most beneficial form of CF. However, as I have cautioned above, the relative brevity of my study makes any definitive conclusion as to the long term effects of focused direct CF with oral metalinguistic feedback unwise. Rather, I think that the positive results of my study confirm that the effects of focused direct CF with oral metalinguistic feedback should be investigated further.

The majority of students were not comfortable with the grammatical terms present simple and present continuous when discussing the tasks, regardless of the feedback form they had received. Notwithstanding this, the majority of the students interviewed were able to explain the present continuous as something that is done “right now.” Conversely, almost all of the students had a very hard time explaining the present simple, and many became confused about the present tense in general as their explanations progressed. This is not surprising due to the shift in teaching practices in Sweden from the traditional grammar-based method, which relied heavily on teaching the rules of a language to what Yule describes as “communicative approaches” (p. 190). These approaches emphasize the practical applications of language and focus on communication rather than structure. Significantly, Skolverket does not have a single knowledge requirement (kunskapskrav) that expressly identifies grammar in its curriculum for English in compulsory school. Students are not comfortable speaking
about grammar in an academic sense, because they are not taught language from a grammar-based perspective. Their intuitive sense of what is correct when speaking and writing is a result of the communicative approach taken in Sweden schools.

All students in the study expressed appreciation for the feedback they received, regardless of which type it was. This phenomenon has been observed by many researchers (Radecki & Swales 1988; Leki 1991; Ferris 1995; Truscott 1999; Chandler 2003), however Chandler found that her students preferred direct feedback over all other types (p. 291). She speculated that this was due to the fact that students had been provided with the correct answer and therefore were able to instantly make the required corrections. In my study, all of the students received direct feedback, so the fact that they all appreciated it may simply confirm what Chandler found. None of my students referred to the specific type of feedback they received when they expressed their appreciation for it, and only one student indicated that she would have preferred additional personalised feedback, so that she would know why she had made the error. On the whole, it can be said that students were grateful for feedback in any form.
6 Conclusion

The results of this study have confirmed the positive effects of focused direct CF that have been identified in previous studies, and have additionally indicated that focused direct CF can be further enhanced by adding a metalinguistic explanation. An oral metalinguistic explanation seemed to produce the most consistent results, however the fact that a personalised, written metalinguistic explanation also produced results should not be discounted. Further studies would be needed to assess the long-term effect of either type of enhancement.

This study also showed that Swedish students are neither familiar nor comfortable with L2 grammatical terms and concepts, yet they are able to instinctively apply L2 rules in a way that produces effective, comprehensible communication. This could be a reflection of the communication-centred teaching approach favoured in Swedish schools. The shift in emphasis away from structure and form towards the communicative function of the L2 can understandably produce students who are not comfortable talking about language, but are very comfortable using it.

Finally, it is clear from this study that students sincerely appreciate all forms of CF feedback, even if they don’t always apply the feedback correctly. Students believe that CF is valuable and useful and overwhelmingly, so do teachers. The challenge for future researchers is to produce studies that can direct teachers towards the most effective form for their feedback.

There were several limitations with this study. The most obvious one is the short period of time over which the study was conducted. It would be very interesting to conduct a similar study over an entire semester or school year, in order to properly gauge what long-term effects may result from enhancing focused CF. Also, the participants were chosen from a relatively affluent and homogenous group. The municipality where the students live has one of the lowest immigration rates in Sweden. Choosing subjects from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds may produce different, but equally interesting results.
Bibliography


Appendix 1

Translation Task 1

Name: ___________________________

Age: _________________________

Translate the following text into English.


________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

*Pictures downloaded from Google and labeled for non-commercial re-use
Appendix 2

Writing Task 1

Your task is to describe **ONE** of these pictures. What do you see in the picture? What is happening? Who are the people and what do you know about them? **Try to be as detailed as possible:**

describe their clothes, actions, personalities, etc.

*Pictures downloaded from Google and labeled for non-commercial re-use*
Translate the following text into English.


*Pictures downloaded from Google and labeled for non-commercial re-use
Appendix 4

Writing Task 2

Your task is to describe **ONE** of these pictures. What do you see in the picture? What is happening? Who are the people and what do you know about them? **Try to be as detailed as possible:**

describe their clothes, actions, personalities, etc.

*Pictures downloaded from Google and labeled for non-commercial re-use*
Appendix 5

Consent Form

Dear Student,

My name is Kelly Blomberg and I teach English at Skanör-Falsterbo Montessori School. I am writing a research paper in the field of language acquisition at Malmö University. I will be looking at the writing of Grade 9 students – that’s you! I would greatly appreciate it if you would help me with my research by giving me two samples of your writing – one today and one next week.

Please note that your participation is voluntary and your answers will be anonymous. I require your name on the papers solely to be able to identify your work when I am looking at the results. I will not include your name in my study.

Thank you in advance for helping me with my work😊

Consent:

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.

Participant’s Name: ____________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________