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Corrective feedback on L2 students' writing

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Preface

Both authors/researchers of this thesis hereby state that the workload was divided equally, and that the research and the paper was conducted together. This includes:

- deciding on appropriate research questions
- constructing the separate parts of the paper
- conducting the research
- combining the authors' individual ideas and reflections

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Abstract

Corrective feedback (CF) is regarded as a controversial topic when it comes to writing in the L2 classroom. Some researchers have found it to be both meaningless and harmful, while others have researched the effects of different types of CF and found it to be good for language development in several ways. This made us interested in conducting a study focusing on what attitudes grade 3-5 (age 9-11) teachers have concerning CF, and if they themselves use it for their L2 students' writing.

The study was conducted through five semi-structured interviews with teachers working in Lund, Sweden. The aim of the study was to investigate compulsory school teachers' experiences of and thoughts on CF as a teaching method for improving young L2 learners' writing. The results revealed that the teachers believe CF to be an irreplaceable part of language learning but that it should be adapted to each individual's needs. Although all interviewed teachers acknowledged CF's potential harm on learners' motivation and willingness to write, no one believed that it could be left out completely

Key terms: corrective feedback (CF), young learners, L2 writing, formative feedback

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1. Introduction

During our VFU, we have seen different teachers giving various kinds of feedback to students. Some engage in oral feedback, some in written and some combine the two, while there are other teachers that simply give their students grades directly (summative feedback/assessment). This observation made us curious about what is really their thoughts behind what feedback they give, and when. Because of the ongoing debate of whether or not corrective feedback (CF) should be used in the second language (L2) writing classroom, we take a special interest in whether or not teachers provide this as a part of formative feedback for young learners.

Being able to write has been considered an important skill for the English language learning. According to the syllabus for English and the National curriculum for the compulsory school in Sweden, “the school is responsible for ensuring that each student on completing compulsory school can communicate in English in the written language” (Skolverket 2011, p. 15). Already in Swedish compulsory school, grade 1-3 (age 6-9), the student should be able to write “simple descriptions and messages” (Skolverket 2011, p. 33). The teacher is, however, also responsible for not discouraging any student’s will to learn, he or she should “reinforce the pupils’ desire to learn as well as the pupil’s confidence in their own ability” (p. 16). Because some research has found CF to have negative effects on L2 writing, it is important to investigate if and how CF is being used in the L2 classroom.

To improve students’ writing skills, feedback as a teaching tool has been discussed extensively in teacher training college. Although it may seem like something solely positive, the topic is quite controversial; and when implementing it in a classroom setting there are questions to be asked and reflected upon. The most obvious question may very well be: is the feedback I give advantageous or not for the students? When it comes to CF, the answer to that particular question does not come easily. Over the years researchers have examined the effects of different types of CF on adult L2 writers with results that do not necessarily agree with one another. Truscott (1996), who first started this debate, found it to be enormously ineffective and even in some cases harmful, while on the other hand Ferris (1999) argued that CF is highly recommendable and should therefore have a natural place in L2 writing classes.

Today, most data attests the value of CF on overall accuracy on L2 students' texts. However, what is stated about CF for adult L2 learners does not necessarily apply to children. When adults learn a new language, they typically have a number of useful resources to rely on given that they are already proficient in one or more languages (Pinter 2006, p. 17). This ability allows them to compare the separate languages with each other, see patterns and draw conclusions. Young children can of course not make use of their mother tongue in the same way, both because they are not yet proficient enough and because they are not able to reflect on how their first language works (Pinter 2006, p. 17). This is the reason for us to investigate what a few teachers of young children use and prefer when it comes to CF, and also why we believe that this study might interest all teachers of young L2 learners. Benefitting from the results of this study are L2 teachers and therefore hopefully also L2 students.

1.1.Purpose and Research Questions

Teachers are supposed to help their students learn in the best way they possibly can. This means, among other things, that they sometimes need to provide feedback to help the students see what they have already accomplished and what can be done better (Lightbown & Spada 2006). The teacher must also at all times consider the students' feelings regarding the feedback, so that it does not have a negative effect on their motivation. Especially writing tasks can be very tiring and stressful for this age group, as they are often not very good at writing in any language yet, and used incorrectly, feedback can discourage students to the point where they no longer have any motivation (Lightbown & Spada 2006).

We have chosen to investigate whether teachers in Lund, Sweden believe CF to be helpful for L2 writers, grade 3-5 (age 9-11), and if they themselves use it. The purpose of the study is to contribute to the field of feedback for young L2 learners, since it is crucial for both student and teacher to receive and give the most effective form of feedback, as this has a huge pedagogical value.

Research questions:

- What are the attitudes towards corrective feedback (CF) as a teaching method for improving young L2 learners' writing among five (grade 3-5) Swedish compulsory school teachers?
- If the teacher makes use of CF as a teaching method, what type of and why?
- What possible advantages and disadvantages can the teachers identify?

2. Background

2.1. Key terms

Following concepts are of great value for readers of this essay to be familiar with:

Formative feedback/assessment

The main aim of formative assessment is to inform and improve teaching (Pinter 2006, p. 132). To be able to do formative assessment, the teacher needs to be aware of where the child starts, e.g. what he or she knows at the beginning of a task. Given the pupil's starting point, the teacher then identifies what the student has learnt and what is yet to be learned while there is still time for the student to correct errors, or for the teacher to modify the teaching (Pinter 2006, p. 133).

Summative feedback/assessment

Summative assessment/feedback is the opposite of –formative. It can take form of a grade or a number and is provided as a gathered assessment of a student's performance during a longer period of time: "Taking stock of what has been learnt and achieved at the end of a longer period, for example, at the end of a course or a year" (Pinter 2006, p. 132).

Oral/written feedback

According to Sheen (2010) there are some noticeable differences between oral and written feedback that are worth mentioning. First, oral feedback is usually given to the student immediately after the language error is made. In the case of written feedback, there is often a delay at least for a few hours (p. 176). Second, oral feedback demands that the receiver remembers it long enough to learn from it, while written feedback can be read several times. Third, oral feedback can contain much less information about errors made and about the content, than what written feedback has the potential to. This because it can point at several

types of errors in a text at once without confusing the receiver or strain his/her memory (Sheen 2010, p. 176).

Corrective feedback (CF)

Corrective feedback gives either an explicit or an implicit indication to the learner that he or she uses the target language incorrectly (Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 197).

Ellis (2009) identifies six different types of CF (p. 99). However, we will just present the three that are relevant to this study:

- Direct CF: the teacher marks the error and provides the student with the correct form.
- Indirect CF: the teacher indicates that the student has made an error without providing the correct form.
- Focused/unfocused CF: in case of focused CF the teacher chooses to correct one or a few types of errors in a student text. In the case of unfocused CF the teacher corrects all student errors independent of how many and what types they are.

2.2.Literature Review

The question of whether or not to provide L2 students' written work with CF to improve their writing accuracy has been eagerly debated since Truscott (1996) published a review essay arguing that corrective feedback on L2 students' writing were not only useless but could also be harmful. Truscott states that CF is part of common practice in L2 writing courses: both teachers and students expect and want it to be part of the training (p. 327). Truscott claims that correction "...is typically done in terms of isolated points and without reference either to the processes by which the linguistic system develops or to the learner's current developmental stage. In other words, it is a superficial form of teaching/learning" (p. 347). Truscott cites numerous studies that he claims support his thesis.

Research has been conducted later on with conclusions that match the ones made by Truscott (1996). Polio, Fleck and Leder (1998) examined 65 undergraduate and graduate English

Second Language (ESL) students' 30-minute drafts and 60-minute revision in one semester at Michigan State University. The study compared two groups' linguistic accuracy on the revised version of the students' essays. One experimental group received correction, grammar review, and training in editing their writing while a control group received no CF at all. By comparing these two groups, the study showed that there are no difference in students' linguistic accuracy in writing. It concluded that CF has no effect on linguistic accuracy. "Students can and do correct their own language without feedback" (p. 61).

As a response to Truscott, Ferris (1999) wrote a conflicting article stating that Truscott's claim was overly strong and that CF could actually be beneficial for L2 writers. She stated that, in her experience "...there is tremendous variability in students' ability to benefit from grammar instruction and feedback and to learn to self-correct, and many students have made dramatic improvements in their accuracy over the course of a semester" (p. 7). This sparked a huge debate among researchers of the field; and one of the conclusions made was that although many researchers believed CF to be an irreplaceable part of L2 writing, there was not much research supporting this notion. Chandler (2003) stated that "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). Ferris (1999) concludes:

The issue of helping students to develop their written language skills and improve their accuracy in writing is too important to be ruled on hastily. As teachers, we can only hope that we will continue to find answers and discover ways to respond more thoughtfully and effectively to our student writers' needs. (p. 10).

Many studies have since been conducted, researching and comparing different types of CF with each other and to a control group. They claim different types and aspects of CF to be most effective for L2 writers. Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) conducted a study aiming to find out to what extent the type of CF given on ESL students' texts determined their accuracy when producing new writing. What they found was that explicit, written feedback in combination with oral one-to-one feedback significantly improved the participants writing in terms of both past simple tense and the definite article. It also improved the writing accuracy over time. The researchers finally suggest that "classroom L2 writing teachers provide their

learners with both oral feedback as well as written feedback on the more “treatable” types of linguistic error on a regular basis” (Bitchener, Young & Cameron 2005, p. 202).

In contrast to Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005), Sheen (2010) compared the separate effectiveness of using oral feedback or written corrective feedback on learners’ accurate use of English articles. The result revealed that the written direct correction showed greater effects than oral recast in helping learners improve their grammatical accuracy of English articles. There were no evidence showing that the oral recast group and control group made any progress concerning grammatical accuracy of English articles. The researcher concluded that there are differences between oral corrective feedback and written corrective feedback: oral recasts are more implicit whereas written corrective feedback is explicit and the corrective function is clear to the learner. Therefore, learners might not notice errors they committed with oral corrective feedback and that could be the reason why it was not effective. Sheen states that the effectiveness of the CF depended on the clarity (Sheen 2010).

Like Sheen (2010), Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) also found external factors to affect the effectiveness of the given CF. The researchers conducted a study aiming to find out how L2 learners process direct-/indirect CF and what factors that affect them, the results were inconclusive (Storch & Wigglesworth 2010). Which type of CF that worked best depended on which student it was given to and also how extensive that student’s engagement with the feedback was. Whether or not the CF was effective depended on a complex interaction of linguistic and affective factors (such as student belief, attitude, goals, etc.).

Similar comparisons were done earlier by Chandler (2003), who in her study found that whilst underlining of errors (indirect CF) were good for students proficient enough to self-correct, correction of errors (direct CF) proved most effective overall. Having said this, she also states that for correctness of written English to occur the students need to revise their work based on the CF they were given. To be given feedback but not rewrite the text is comparable to not receiving any feedback at all. Moreover she concludes that “...students tend to write more when their writing is not being marked for any kind of surface error than when it is” (p. 292).

Lyster and Saito (2010) investigated in a meta-analytical way the pedagogical effectiveness of oral corrective feedback (CF) on English as target language development. The result showed that oral corrective feedback facilitated ESL learners’ language development and had a

positive long term effect on their writing accuracy. With regard to the learners' ages, the study concluded that younger learners appeared sensitive to CF, but they benefited more than older learners according to comparisons of the progress (Lyster & Saito 2010).

To investigate whether CF on L2 texts were effective, and if so whether direct or indirect CF was most beneficial, Van Beuningen, de Jong and Kuiken (2008) compared the two different CF methods to two control groups: one offered the students similar assignments to practise their writing skills, and the other had students self-correct their texts without any feedback. Results stated that all groups but the one practising on similar assignments produced fewer errors in their revision texts, though only the accuracy gains made by the two CF groups turned out to be significant. This said, only the group given direct CF showed long-term effects on accuracy.

In a study comparing focused (providing error correction alone on specific functional uses of limited number of rule-based features) with unfocused (providing error correction on all of the existing errors from different grammatical features in learners' one piece of writing) direct WCF, Farrokhi (2012) found that both WCF groups outperformed the control group. Even though the participants were already high-proficient L2 learners, the effectiveness of WCF was evident immediately after it had been provided. More than this, the study stated that focused direct WCF was more effective than unfocused.

Evans, Hartshorn and Strong-Krause (2011) aimed to investigate what effect dynamic WCF had on university-matriculated ESL learners. The control group took in this study part in the traditional university process writing course, while the experimental group took a course that emphasized dynamic WCF. The results of the study showed that while the effects from WCF on fluency and complexity in the texts were negligible, the overall accuracy improved largely.

3.Method

To hopefully find out what a few English teachers experiences of and thoughts on CF as a teaching method for improving young L2 learners' writing in Swedish compulsory school are, we chose to do semi-structured interviews with five teachers working at three different schools. The aim of our method is to gather a small sample of data that provides insight to what English teachers in Lund, Sweden do and think concerning this issue.

The interview is a qualitative method to its nature, and it is often used to gather deep-set, rather than shallow, information from the one interviewed. As said by Kvale (2009): "A qualitative research interview seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level" (p. 30). The interviewer can listen to the descriptions and interpret what the interviewee says in order to formulate both explicit and implicit messages (Kvale 2009, p. 30).

3.1.Participants

The participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were selected because of their interest to take part. We came in contact with the participants by reaching out to teachers we knew through VFU, work and friends, asking them whom we should contact for this study. Suggestions were made and thereafter we contacted the future participants via e-mail.

All participants were during this study active teachers of English in three separate Swedish compulsory schools, for pupils in grade 3-5 (age 9-11). One of the participants had been working as a teacher for just about half a year, while the rest of them had at least 5-10 years of experience. Because of the reasons stated above, they have great possibilities to provide information that could help us answer our research questions, and they were therefore considered appropriate participants for this study.

3.2.Context and Procedure

The interviews were carried out during four days after contacting the participants via e-mail. All of them took place on school property during school hours. Four of the interviews were

conducted in quiet and empty group rooms, whilst the fifth had to be conducted in a staff work room.

The interviews each took 25-50 minutes and were all carried out in Swedish. This decision was made in an attempt to make the participants more relaxed and free-spoken. In our experience, talking in another language than what you usually do can mean that some things are never said. This can be because one feels uncomfortable in the situation or not proficient enough to express what one really feels. Because the interviews were carried out in Swedish, the transcribed parts had to be translated into English before putting them in this essay. The translations were done by the researchers.

When answering our questions the teachers were told to speak of CF for L2 learners' texts. This meant that in some cases they referred to students learning Swedish as L2, and not only English as L2. Hence the study reports on L2 writing overall, more than just English L2 writing.

3.3. Instruments

We chose to use a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews because “a semi-structured interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects' own perspectives” (Kvale 2009, p. 27). Furthermore, Dörnyei (2009) claims that a semi-structured interview allows interviewers to ask open-ended questions and interviewees to answer questions as they please.

Before we conducted the interviews, we prepared an interview guide with around ten main open-ended questions (which can be found in the Appendix), that were sent to the interviewees a day or two before the scheduled interview. The decision to send the interview questions before the interviews took place, was made in order to somewhat prepare the interviewees on what the interview would concern, and also to give them time to reflect on their answers. The definitions of the four types of CF presented in the Background were also sent to the teachers. This way, we reasoned, we would be able to collect more deep-set information.

We chose these questions for guiding our interviews because they are relevant to our research questions. Furthermore, it is important to use the interview guide to facilitate the interviewees understanding of the research theme before interviewing. According to Dörnyei (2009), an interview guide with questions is a main research instrument for preparing both the interviewer to ask structured questions and the interviewee to answer both easy and more difficult questions.

During the interviews, we recorded the sound using one of the interviewer's iPhone. We chose to record the interviews for a few reasons stated by Bryman (2011):

- it makes you remember better what was said during the interview, since you can go back and check,
- it simplifies a thorough analysis of *what* was said and *how* it was said,
- the interviews can easily be revisited by both researcher and other parts interested,
- accusations of how the interviews were conducted can easily be refuted (p. 428).

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Before starting the sound recording of the interviews, all interviewees were asked and each gave their individual consent. They were all promised anonymity. The reason for us to promise them this is because “protecting confidentiality is an ethical issue. Only anonymity can protect the participants and is thus an ethical demand for researchers” (Kvale 2009, p. 73).

With regard to the participants, all of them are English teachers, working in three separate Swedish compulsory schools in classes with students in grade 3-5 (age 9-11). They were all selected because of their interest to take part. Consequently, the results of our research are simply a gathered fragment of information, and not necessarily something that is adaptable on any other teachers or schools in Sweden.

4.Results

When interviewing the participants of this study, a number of themes were uncovered. These will be presented in the result section below divided into sub-headings that each is relevant to the research questions. The interviews were, as mentioned earlier, recorded, and the parts of them presented below were later on transcribed. Since all interviews were carried out in Swedish, the transcribed parts had to be translated into English. This was done by the researchers. If nothing else is stated, the transcribed parts below are quotes from the teachers. Affirmative mumbling (or such) from the interviewers has been left out since we believe this will confuse the reader. Henceforth, the teachers will be referred to as interviewee one, -two, -three, -four and -five.

4.1.Attitudes on CF as a teaching method for improving L2 learners' writing

100% of the participants of the study believed CF to be an irreplaceable part of language learning.

Interviewee one: "But it feels like, if you as a teacher don't give feedback on or talk about the errors, how is the student supposed to see it, you know?"

Although 60% of them added, this notion is only true if the aim of the feedback is at least partly to improve the correctness of the students' written language and if the aim is just to have the students write a long text, CF is not necessarily needed.

Interviewee two:

I think it depends on what the purpose is, what you are aiming at, if your aim is that you should learn to use, use a language correctly, then I think you need to work on it.

20% of the participants added that for CF to be effective, it needs to be provided adjacent to the assignment, otherwise it might as well not be given at all since the student can no longer see its relevance. 40% of the participants also believed that it would be easier for the student in the long run if CF was part of the feedback they receive from an early age.

Interviewee five:

One cannot let a low-achieving child proceed doing the same mistake over and over again, because then the error gets established... if he writes 'and' (*Swedish: och*) incorrectly all the time, he will just continue doing that. Yes, and then it might become harder correcting the errors.

Although 100% of the interviewed teachers believed that CF was necessary, 100% of them also stressed the importance of adapting it to the individual student receiving it. 100% of them believed in correcting almost all errors in the text of a high-achieving student but only a few, if any, in the text of a low-achieving student.

Interviewee five:

...if there's a child that is very weak and has struggled a lot to learn and really get going and has just written his first sentence, or something, eh... then I would *never* correct that. If I do, this child would fall back again. 'Oh, it was still wrong, I tried but I wasn't correct anyway...' But if I instead let him believe it went good, and carefully you correct a little now and a little the next time...

40% also noted that some high-achieving students think of themselves as infallible, and therefore they too may have a hard time accepting the CF received. 20% said that the teacher must be cautious with high-achieving students so that they do not start feeling compelled to always do well. 40% of the participants also noted that they adapt what they correct to what is stated in the core content of the national curriculum (2011).

Interviewee one:

First and foremost we take our starting point in Lgr11. What are we supposed to do: what core content are you processing in this working area, and what are the goals that you want your students to reach?

In the end, all participants agreed with each other that to be comfortable with how much CF to provide each individual student with, the teacher must know his/her class, and every student in it, very well. Moreover, 20% of the teachers believe that if the student knows his/her teacher, and recognises that CF is provided to help him/her, every problem in this area is fixable.

Interviewee one:

It is very different from students to student. That's when you as a teacher must consider which students you have in front of you. Like, how I provide feedback in the best way so that you recognise every student... some students may also be annoyed, perhaps, if they haven't received any feedback or have received too little corrective, you know... they want to learn more. They want to be corrected.

4.2. What type of CF and why?

When using written CF, 80% of the participants said that for children this young (lower- and intermediate school) they provide the direct kind: underlining the error and providing the correct form. 40% of them added that for students a bit older (junior high school) indirect written CF, in form of indicating an error but not what kind of nor the correct form, can be used more effectively.

Interviewee two:

I provide direct correct for my grade 5 students because it is difficult for them to figure out what is the correct form, and they have not been learning English for very long. However, for my grade 8 students... I usually just underline the language errors for older students so that they can correct it themselves.

100% of the participants said they made use of both written and oral CF, although 20% added that they only use written CF for the errors that they know the student can correct easily.

Interviewee four:

If it concerns small mistakes, that I know they're familiar with, like capital letter and punctuation, then I could provide written CF. But if it concerns more severe errors I prefer to do it orally.

40% of the participants: the grade 3 (lower school) teachers, stated that they prefer oral CF. This because oral CF gives the teacher and student a chance to have a conversation about the text, and this in turn, 20% of them add, makes the students remember the feedback better.

Interviewee four:

If you do it orally you can have a discussion, a dialogue, about it. If I provide it in writing it's one-way communication, then it's just me telling them something. [...] And somehow it feels... it feels harder to get... perhaps a lot of errors on a piece of paper, and like 'there you go, correct these'. Then (*in case of oral CF*) you can also sense 'how is the student responding?' [...] ...it (*oral CF*) feels so much easier (*than written CF*). It doesn't seem as harsh as 'here you have a paper with a lot of errors'.

40% of the participants states that written CF is preferable. Half of them added that this preference is because providing oral CF takes too much time. The other half believed that written CF is more memorable for the student, because he/she can go back and look at it again.

Interviewee two:

It's more a matter of time, I think, I mean if I had time to sit down and read a text together... and then explain how they (*the students*) could do it differently, that would be great! But of course we don't have time for that...

20% of the teachers preferred to make individual calls between oral- and written CF, depending on what student would receive it.

Interviewee one:

I believe in a combination, because with some you must, you know, you must as well as possible know your students. Some of my students, they can handle just receiving written (*CF*). So, okay, that's what I'll do the next time. Then with some students you may need to explain. You say what the matter is and talk to them.

80% of the participants state that they sometimes make the student read his/her own text and self-correct.

Interviewee five:

It's really best if they correct themselves. Because I believe they will remember it better when they self-correct than when I point at something while they write. I think they remember it better when they see it themselves. Then they will look more carefully at the word. If they get back a text that I've corrected, let's say: two underlined words and then the correct form in the margin. Then they will just copy and rewrite and then they don't really think about it. When they themselves compare two words, and can see the error, then I believe they remember it better than if they just copy my corrections.

80% of the interviewed teachers highlighted the importance of *always* providing positive feedback (praise, etc.) alongside CF.

Interviewee three: "I want them to always feel that what they have accomplished is good, and

like, positive feedback.... And this is what we'll work on..."

40% of them added that positive feedback at this young age is more important than error correction. The total number of teachers also believed that the student's self-esteem and motivation were important factors for successful language learning, and therefore the teacher need to give every student positive affirmation.

Interviewee five:

Motivation is really important, and that's why they need positive feedback *more* than corrective feedback, really. Because it should be fun. So if I all the time should correct a child, a child that I know is a little vulnerable and thinks that things are kind of hard, if I should then correct him all the time, he would get back.... assignments with markings and such... then he would *not* think it was fun. He would have... that's how it is, and it goes for all subjects.

40% of the participants said that they sometimes just praise the student with positive feedback, not correcting anything.

Interviewee one:

If you only provide them with positive feedback, then on some students you can see the next time they have 'news homework' (*write about a piece of news*)... they really live up in a different way, they really absorb the positive feedback, you know, and then they do that even better on the next homework. And if you provide a little less positive feedback you can no longer see this joy in their writing.

4.3. Identifying advantages and disadvantages with CF for L2 writing

100% of the participating teachers believed that CF has the potential to do the student both

good and bad, depending on various factors including the student's personality. They all thought of it as irreplaceable as long as the intention is to teach the students the correct forms of the language. They all agreed on that the biggest disadvantage with providing young students with CF is the possibility that it drags the student down and make him/her lose motivation to write. The decision to provide CF, and how much of it, should be dependent on each individual student.

Interviewee two: "There's still the issue of them feeling discouraged, and then it might not be worth it..."

Interviewee three: "Well, I think it becomes negative if you point at too many things (*errors*), then I believe their self-esteem lowers, and they think that 'I suck'"

20% of the interviewed teachers also stated that another disadvantage is when CF is not given in direct connection to the writing assignment, then it might as well not be given at all, since the child will just automatically correct but not understand and learn from it.

Interviewee five:

If you do an assignment now, and the teacher comes to talk about it. If you correct it right then it happens in direct connection (*to the assignment*). If you get it back a few days later... then I don't believe it's the same thing. Then they might have forgotten it. And they wonder 'what did we do? Right, that's it. So that should be corrected, okay, I might as well correct it then.' – if they get it back some days later. They just do what the teacher has told them to do: correct.

40% of the participants state that they do not make their students rewrite/correct their texts after they have been given CF. They believe this would be too hard on the student and would take too much effort for it to be defendable. Half of those believed that students would regard rewriting their texts as a punishment.

Interviewee one:

On this text they had these errors: rewrite correctly. It feels almost like a punishment, you know. [...] ...then there are some students that would perhaps

gain from having to rewrite their texts correctly. But I still can't shake the feeling of that it feels more like a punishment than something they would benefit from.

20% of the participants state that for any CF to be useful, the student receiving it must be willing to take it in and want to learn.

Interviewee two:

First, I must... eh... make them see that there's an error. Then they must *want* to learn the correct form! If they don't I might as well underline the whole text as many times as I want, right? If they don't do the job I don't think there's any point.

5. Discussion

Although the results revealed that all interviewed teachers agreed on CF as a vital part of L2 writing, they used different approaches and reasoned about this in different ways. This chapter aim to connect previous research to the present study by discussing and analysing the results found. The chapter will be divided into paragraphs to give structure and help the reader understand what parts of the result we discuss at what time. The research questions we aim to answer are as follows:

- What are the attitudes towards corrective feedback (CF) as a teaching method for improving young L2 learners' writing among five (grade 3-5) Swedish compulsory school teachers?
- If the teacher makes use of CF as a teaching method, what type of and why?
- What possible advantages and disadvantages can the teachers identify?

5.1. CF adapted to the individual needs of the student

One thing that immediately became very clear to us when interviewing the participants of the study, was that if the teacher provides CF to the written work of his/her L2 students, it needs to be adapted to each individual with his/her personality, strengths and weaknesses in mind. This was also confirmed by Storch and Wigglesworth (2010), who found a number of factors, like student beliefs, goals and attitude, to impact the effect of the feedback. Guénette (2007), who compared a number of studies to each other aiming to find out if feedback is pedagogically correct, stated that teachers should provide CF to their students, but that they need to be aware of that there's no "recipe" on how to do it (p. 51). The success or failure will depend on classroom context, type of errors made by the students, the student's proficiency level, writing task type, etc. So, all teachers seem to be on the same page as Guénette (2007), but could there be any possible risks with not providing the same feedback to all children in a class?

According to all participants, part of adjusting the CF to the recipient means providing different amounts of error correction to high- and low-achieving students. Indirectly this

means that the low-achieving students gets focused CF (the teacher corrects one or a few type of errors at a time) while the high-achieving students are provided with unfocused CF (correction of all types of errors at the same time). Will this make a difference in what they learn and how they perceive the CF they get? According to Farrokhi (2012) this is the case. Farrokhi found that, even though both types of WCF proved to be better than none, the students given focused CF performed better than the ones given unfocused CF (2012). So what does this mean for the L2 student who is provided with unfocused CF because he/she is high-achieving and can personally handle that every error is corrected and not feel sad or get low self-esteem? Does it have a negative effect on the language development in the long run?

According to Chandler (2003), individual adaptations may very well be done. Chandler stated that students proficient enough to handle it may only be given indirect CF (underlining), while students that aren't yet that proficient may be given direct CF (underlining + correct form). This is also how we interpret the Swedish curriculum (2011) when it says that the teacher should "take into account each individual's needs, circumstances, experiences and thinking" (p. 16). What we have been taught during our time in teacher-training college matches what the interviewed teachers claimed to be doing and also what a number of researchers, like Chandler (2003), Guénette (2007), Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) and the curriculum (2011) said; that teaching and feedback should be adapted to the individual student.

Maybe adapting the feedback to each individual means not providing any CF for some students. Not all students (or any at all) benefit from CF, should one believe in the results found by both Truscott (1996) and Polio, Fleck and Leder (1998). Guénette (2007), who herself worked as a teacher, introduces her article with following words:

Regardless of the technique I used, the better students seemed to respond well, while the weaker students constantly needed to be pushed, reminded, and encouraged to write and rewrite. I eventually came to the conclusion that no matter what teachers did, some students would benefit from focused instruction and corrective feedback while others would not. (p. 41)

This problem is also why all teachers interviewed for this study agreed that the teacher must know his/her students well. Only then can the call between CF, no CF or a little CF be made with confidence.

5.2.If not CF, then what instead?

If CF is not an alternative, but the teacher still believes it to be essential to learn a language correctly, what may the teacher use instead? This particular question was frequently reflected upon during our interviews with the participants of the study. If no CF is provided, and the students do not know what they are doing or spelling wrong, how are they supposed to learn? Say they do not receive any CF, just positive recognition and praise, how will the student then react when he/she reaches an age when it is no longer acceptable to make simple errors, and is told of everything that he/she does incorrectly?

Interviewee two:

I don't really know if this is the case... but hypothetically, if you imagine we don't correct their (*students*) errors. And they get it back.... Then they will be encouraged all the time, right? Then they will become very, eh... confident, of expressing themselves in English – which of course is nice. But they will still express themselves incorrectly. And... and, what will I then encounter in grade 9? Eh, if I were to correct them... (Mumbling) Then it will be like I'm some person from Mars coming to change their view of the world. Because then, when they're 15, then they're *completely* convinced that they know all English there is to know. They are perfected! They're not responsive at all to someone saying that they should practise the irregular verbs.

On the one hand, Polio, Fleck and Leder (1998) stated that students can, and will, self-correct (p. 61), but on the other hand Van Beuningen, de Jong and Kuiken (2008) concluded that while the self-correcting experimental group of their study indeed made fewer errors, there were no accuracy gains visible. Also Chandler (2003) found CF to be effective, *but* that students tended to write more when no CF was given to them. It seems like if you want to leave CF out completely, you need to decide what is most important: that the students learn their L2 correctly or that the students produce long, but inaccurate, texts. Maybe you cannot have both.

5.3. Positive feedback as a part of CF

80% of the teachers we interviewed agreed on that CF should never be given solely, but in combination with positive feedback. One fourth of them (the 80%) added that positive feedback is far more important for L2 learners of this age than CF is, and half of them (the 80%) said that they sometimes *just* praise students. On this matter, researchers do not agree. William (2013), for one, concludes that praise has no effect on student achievement and Wong and Zhang Waring (2008) notes that in order for praise to function as reinforcement, three features must be present: the praise must be coherent to the actual time and place of the behaviour that is being reinforced, the praise must point out what behaviour is being reinforced and the praise must be sincere and addressed to the exact context in question (p. 196). Wong and Zhang Waring (2008) further argues that teachers should be careful just saying “very good” to students, since this might stop the student from asking more questions and also make him/her believe that everything he/she did was “very good”; positive feedback should at all times be meaningful and authentic. The statements done by both William (2013) and Wong and Zhang Waring (2008) made us wonder if all praise given to young students really is meaningful and authentic. And if it is not, does it serve any purpose at all? Maybe the purpose of encouraging the students to write long texts is sometimes enough. As concluded by Chandler (2003): “...students tend to write more when their writing is not being marked for any kind of surface error than when it is.” (p. 292).

5.4. The choice between oral and written CF

Of course, all individuals cannot prefer the same things. This also goes for teachers in the choice between oral and written CF for L2 students’ writing. When asked the question what type of CF they typically use and prefer, the answers were mixed:

- 20% of the participants prefer to use a mix of oral, written and whole-class CF, depending on the student receiving it and the type of error,
- 40% prefer to use written CF although half of them states that this is due to lack of time,
- 40% prefer to use oral CF and preferably in the form of a dialogue with the student, rather than the teacher telling the student something. Half of them (the 40%) add that

the most important feature of CF is that it happens in direct connection to the assignment.

5.4.1.Oral CF

Something that we found interesting with these results, were that the 40% preferring oral CF, were the lower school, grade 3, teachers. This indicates that this choice is age dependent. These teachers, working in grade 3 classes, argued that when giving CF to children this young, you need to be there to soften the critique and to see how the child reacts on what you are saying. What Lyster and Saito (2010) found, when researching the effectiveness of oral CF, was that it was especially good for young learners. They stated that the younger students appeared more sensitive to the CF given, than the older students, but that they also benefitted more from it.

By having a conversation with the student about his/her text, the CF also automatically becomes connected to the assignment in focus, which 20% of the participants believed to be essential for the effectiveness. Half of the 40% preferring oral CF also believed that the child remembers oral CF better than written, because a dialogue is easier to remember than a note on a paper. We believe that both connection to the assignment and an oral dialogue contributes to the clarity of the CF, which Sheen (2010) found to be a vital component when comparing written and oral CF to each other. The level of engagement was something that Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) found to be important, and since the grade 3 teachers preferred to have a dialogue with the student (which means that he/she is at least partly participating), we believe this is something that they agree on.

Another reason for the grade 3 (age 9) teachers to prefer oral- over written CF, and to feel a need to soften critique and comfort the student, could be that there are no knowledge requirements for lower school stated in the national curriculum (2011). This means that that the teacher chooses suitable assignments that fits the core content for lower school students, but there are no distinct goals the student should reach. This means that providing feedback and assess the students can get a bit tricky, and therefore it is probably comforting for both student and teacher to talk directly to one another while taking the first steps on a foreign road.

5.4.2. Written CF

40% of the interviewed teachers stated that they prefer to provide their students with written CF for their L2 texts. Half of them added that this is because it saves the teacher a lot of time when dealing with multiple student texts. The same 40% also said that they give their grade 4-5 (age 10-11) students direct written CF, whilst they tend to give their older students indirect written CF. The difference, they claim, is because the older students should be able to figure out themselves what they have done incorrectly. To young children, they continued, the teacher needs to point at the exact error and what the correct form is. Assuming that older students are often more proficient in their L2 (given that all students start studying L2 at the same age), Chandler (2003) confirms the thoughts of these teachers. She concluded that just underlining is good for students proficient enough to self-correct, but overall, direct CF proved to be most effective and it was also the type of CF most appreciated by the students, who found it easy both to understand and correct (p. 293). Then again, Van Beuningen, de Jong and Kuiken (2008) found only direct CF to have long-term effects on students' written accuracy. As Sheen (2010) argued: the effectiveness of the CF depends on clarity, and for students direct CF seems to be the alternative easiest to understand.

But is there any risk of the students just copying what the teacher has written, when provided with the correct form? Yes, there might be, according to Karim (2013), who brought this issue up as one of the possible limitations of his study. But on the other hand, 20% of the teachers we interviewed for this study claimed that the most important factor when providing CF, is that it is given in immediate connection to the assignment. Maybe it is perfectly alright to provide the students with the correct form, as long as it is done while the student still can relate to the correction and absorb it for writing further on. This was also reflected upon by Chandler (2003): "Perhaps when ESL students can see their errors corrected soon after writing, they internalize the correct form better." (p. 291)

5.4.3. Combining oral- and written CF

Although all teachers argued for individual adaptations of CF, only 20% stated that they prefer to choose between written- and oral CF depending on what student is receiving it. This preference is supported by Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005), who found a combination

of explicit written CF and one-to-one oral CF to be the most effective approach. The preference is also supported by Storch and Wigglesworth (2010), who as stated earlier, claimed that the choice of CF should be dependent on the student.

5.5.CF's impact on student self-esteem and –motivation

Lightbown and Spada (2006) stated that "...there is ample evidence that positive motivation is associated with a willingness to keep learning." (p. 63). According to our interviewees, the biggest disadvantage when providing CF on student texts, is by far the risk of hurting their self-esteem and their motivation to learn and write. This was also what Truscott (1996), who initiated the debate on CF for L2 learners' written texts, found when comparing studies conducted on the subject. Polio, Fleck and Leder (1998) in turn, found CF to have no effect at all on L2 writing, and therefore to be a waste of time.

Interviewee one:

You can always find errors... I don't know... it's like, I think this is like the hard thing about working as a teacher, because you want to... at the same time you feel like you have to provide feedback on what's not working, because that's also what takes them (*students*) forward, but it's also what might ruin it for them. And if you don't have a good balance, like, between positive (*feedback*) and critique (*corrective feedback*) [...] so it's really a matter of how you present your feedback, it can really lift or lower your student.

Students need to experience success when learning a new language, this in turn contributes to positive motivation (Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 185). All teachers interviewed for this study agreed that a low-achieving student with lots of errors will not benefit from having all of them corrected. This will simply just make him/her feel like a failure and lose all motivation and joy. The interviewees and Chandler (2003) all states that CF should be adapted to what is most important for the certain assignment, and nothing else should be corrected at the time. According to 40% of the interviewed teachers, this call should be made with what is stated as core content in the national curriculum (2011), in mind.

Guénette (2007) argued that the effectiveness of CF is dependent on the student's engagement: "...if the students are not committed to improving their writing skills, they will not improve, no matter what type of corrective feedback is provided." (Guénette, p. 52). This was also a concern raised by 20% of the participants of current study.

So ultimately, to us the problem with CF causing lower student self-esteem and –motivation seems much like a vicious circle: motivation is needed for the student to be able to improve from CF, and CF might, if used incorrectly, cause low motivation. Then again, some students might lose motivation and feel nervous from *not* receiving any CF. This fact was stated by our interviewees as well as by Bitchener and Ferris (2012): "Many students are afraid that they will not be able to catch errors on their own if the teachers do not mark them" (p.144).

5.6. Is CF suitable for L2 writers?

40% of the participants of this study stated that they do not make their students rewrite their texts upon the CF they have been given, partly because they are worried students will perceive this as a punishment. However, Chandler (2003) stated that in order for correctness of English to occur, the students need to revise their work based on the CF they were given. To be given CF but not rewrite the text is comparable to not receiving any CF at all (Chandler 2003). So if the teacher makes the choice to correct errors, he/she must make the students act upon it, otherwise it might be a waste of both time and effort.

A fact is also that the knowledge requirements for grade E in year 6 (age 12) states that "In written production, pupils can express themselves simply and understandably in words, phrases and sentences. To clarify and vary their communication, pupils can work on and make some simple improvements to their communications" (Skolverket 2011, p.35). To be able to do this we believe the students must also know how to spell and use grammar correctly. The question raised by the participants of this study comes to mind: how are students supposed to learn if they are not corrected? Bitchener and Ferris (2012) concludes that "CF has the purpose to help student writers build awareness, knowledge, and strategic competence so that they can develop skills to better monitor their own writing in the future" (p. 145).

When it comes to young L2 learners, the teachers who have experience of also teaching L2 to

older learners, spoke of the need to be extra cautious so that the students do not lose their joy or motivation to write, etc. What was found by Lyster and Saito (2010), though, were that even though younger learners appeared sensitive to CF, they benefited more from it than older learners. Maybe this means that the sensitivity of a child can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage? If given the right amount of CF, depending on each individual learner's needs, and the relationship between the student and his/her teacher is built on mutual trust and respect, it sounds to us like L2 students might very well benefit from CF on their written work. As stated by Evans, Hartshorn and Strong-Krause (2011): "Despite the arguments for and against the inclusion of WCF in L2 writing pedagogy, ESL learners frequently struggle to produce writing that is linguistically accurate, and because students face actual demands for linguistically accurate writing, the stigma associated with inaccurate writing cannot be overlooked" (p. 230).

6. Summary and Conclusion

It is important for a teacher to know his/her students well, since this is the only way to in confidence be able to make the call of how much CF to provide each individual with. Oral CF is preferred by lower school teachers and seems to be a good choice for young learners, whilst if using written CF it should be of the direct kind. The teacher could also vary between oral- and written CF to adapt his/her choice to each individual. Is the purpose of the assignment rather to have the students write long and rich texts, CF might as well be left out altogether. It only serves a purpose if the aim is to correct the students' written language.

Providing CF risks hurting the students' self-esteem, motivation and joy, but at the same time, sometimes and for some students, CF is what makes them motivated. The compromise is therefore that the teacher corrects with moderation, choosing some aspects to focus upon with the core content stated in the national curriculum (2011) in mind. This way the students will hopefully remain engaged.

Consequently, when providing CF it is important that

- the individual needs and personality is taken into consideration,
- the student is told to act upon the feedback,
- the focus of it is adapted to the assignment and the core content of Lgr11,
- the relationship between the teacher and student is built on trust and respect.

Our overall conclusion is that between researchers, teachers of the field and the teacher college, there are both differences and similarities. What the teachers said were that it is quite different actually working as a teacher than just reading books and research articles and attending lectures on the subject. With this in mind, we aim to keep our senses open and our brains curious, and take it from there on.

6.1. Limitations of study and suggestions for further research

This study has three obvious limitations. First, the results of the study are likely biased

because of the small sample of information gathered: this includes both the low number of interviewed teachers and that they all work in Lund, Sweden. It might not be relevant or adaptable to any other Swedish primary school.

Second, because the interviews were semi-structured and the questions open-ended, each participant focused on what she believed to be most important while we, as researchers, tried to largely adapt to what was brought up as relevant. This made the interviews look very different, and therefore some interesting statements could not be used for this study.

Third and lastly, the results only reveal what the teachers *believes* to be working for the students they teach. Actual evidence in form of either assignments or student voices were never seen or heard.

As suggestion for further research, we would, considering the limitations above, like to know how students feel about CF as a teaching approach in L2 writing. Do they learn from it? Do they feel depressed by it? This study could be done with a combination of observations and interviews with students, preferably during a longer period of time, like a semester or a year. This way, we would be able to see not only how students feel about CF, but also whether they act upon it and internalize it in the long run of their language development.

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Appendix

Interview guide for semi-structured interviews:

1. What types of feedback do you usually provide for your students' writing? Why?
2. Do you provide corrective feedback (CF) by pointing out errors in the written texts? If so, do you use oral or written CF or a combination of both?
3. What type of errors (language issues or contextual errors) do you usually point out?
4. Do you believe CF to be good or bad for your young students (grade 3-5) when they write in their L2? In what way does it show that it is good or bad?
5. Can you tell any differences in the effectiveness depending on the type of CF given (oral, written or a combination of both)?
6. Can you see that your students act upon the CF? If so, what is the evidence?
7. In your experience, do you need to point out the same type of error repeatedly before your students learn?
8. Do you provide high- and low-achieving students with different types, or amounts, of CF? Why or why not?
9. Are there any other types of feedback that you use in combination with CF? If so, which are these and why do you use them?
10. What would you say is good, respectively bad, about providing CF to L2 writers?
11. What are your thoughts concerning CF for L2 writing being a controversial topic?