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Written corrective feedback in the writing classroom for young English Second Language learners.

Skriflig korrigerande återkoppling för unga engelska andraspråkselever i det skrivande klassrummet.

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Preface

Hereby we both affirm that we equally have contributed in completing this final degree project.

The process includes following:

- finding proper research questions
- interviewing participants
- analyzing the data
- finding result
- concluding the research questions

We are in an agreement and confirming that the following statements are correct.
Abstract

Feedback can be given in many different forms, and the type that is written and strives to either correct students written errors or support their overall writing ability is suitably enough referred to as written corrective feedback (WCF) of which there are two main types of: indirect and direct WCF. We know that second language writers meet many obstacles, be that lack of motivation and vocabulary or misspellings and phrasal issues; nonetheless, teachers thought processes about what type of feedback to give on what type of error is of importance for the continuation of the development of sound feedback approaches. Therefore, we intend to investigate English teachers perceptions on the WCF they give with the help of the following research questions: What are primary school English teachers’ perceptions about WCF in order to promote their ESL students writing development? What are primary school English teachers’ perceptions regarding their choice between written direct CF or written indirect CF on their ESL students written production?

To investigate these questions, we wrote an interview guide, and conducted interviews with seven teachers in 4th to 6th grade, asking about their perceptions on the development of writing in English as a second language and how they would describe their corrective feedback and their thought process on what type to give and when to give it on their student’s writing. Our findings showed that all teachers acknowledged two types of students in their ESL classroom: the high proficiency and the low proficiency. The low proficiency need more direct, clear and specific corrections on most of their writing whilst the high proficiency benefit from more indirect CF in order to make use of their metacognitive thinking skills. The findings also revealed that teachers choose to use indirect or direct CF based on the activity and whether the purpose is to learn grammar or not. If the focus is grammar, they would choose direct CF, and if it was to write a fictional story, they would give more indirect CF in order to not stifle the student’s creative process and “take the fun out of it”.

Our study points to a need of more research within the field of feedback in general, since there is not much evidence showing what approaches are the most beneficial. Another issue is that there are practically no guidelines for teachers to follow, telling them what type to choose and for what activities. This is something for future research to dig deeper into.
Keywords: Written corrective feedback, ESL, Teachers’ perception, writing development
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1. Introduction

For a learner to succeed in language development the teacher should emphasize all language skills such as speaking and writing which are the productive skills and listening and reading, called the receptive skills (Hidayati, 2018). Out of these four main skills the writing skill is the most difficult to learn since students are required to use abstract thinking (Fan & Ma, 2018).

When it comes to how to develop one’s writing there is a substantial body of research (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Grant, 2012, William, 2009) that points to the importance of feedback since it aids learners by providing them with information on how they are doing. However, it can be given in a wide variety of ways and there is not just one way of doing it.

There are many factors that affect a teacher’s choice of feedback such as; its timing, the student, the subject and many more (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). During our teacher practicums in years K-3 and 4-6 we have both noticed how written feedback often is given in a very nonspecific way by appraising comments such as; “Good job!”, “Excellent” or “Interesting story”. Or it might be by the teacher simply giving the student the correct answers by writing the correctly spelled word above the error and so on. This does not give the students any guidance on how to further develop their writing. We find this to be problematic since according to the curriculum students need to be taught strategies on how to revise and work on their communication, be that oral or written. This is further explained by Skolverket (2011) in the syllabus for English:

“To clarify and vary their communication, pupils can work on and make some simple improvements to their communications. In oral and written interaction, pupils can express themselves simply and understandably in words, phrases and sentences. In addition, pupils can choose and use a strategy that solves problems and improves their interaction.” (Skolverket, 2011, p.32)

In English as a second language (ESL), the practice of feedback, specifically corrective feedback (CF), on students written production is commonly practiced by most language teachers and seen as a valuable part of processing writing (Bitchener, 2008; Sheen, 2007), for example by commenting on spelling and grammatical errors so that the student can notice what their errors are and correct them immediately or revise their entire text over a longer period of time.

There exists a larger body of research on the effect of two corrective feedback approaches, namely, direct and indirect. Bitchener (2008), Bitchener & Knoch (2008) and Sheen (2007) are some that
investigate this area and who come to positive conclusions about CF in general, however, other studies claim that there is no or little value to it and Truscott (2007) is a firm believer of its irrelevance in language learning. Furthermore, there are not many studies on how the two main types of CF, indirect and direct, differ in effect when it comes to young learners writing in any language, nonetheless in ESL. Therefore, we saw a purpose of investigating how Swedish schools use CF to prosper sound writing development.

In this study we are focusing on ESL teachers practice and perception of written corrective feedback (WCF) and specifically how direct and indirect WCF is provided and utilized according to the teachers.
2. Statement of purpose

As mentioned in the introduction, feedback is important in the English as a second language classroom and there are various ways of giving it. Investigating to what degree teachers practice written corrective feedback (WCF), on what they give it and how they reflect on it, could be valuable for us as future language teachers.

Research (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) shows that feedback, of all types, can support students in developing their abilities, but, to be specific, not all feedback types foster writing development and second language writing development (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

The feedback that we have observed in schools during our teacher practicums have not been especially detailed or specific, and some scholars, Lundahl (2014), for example, point to the need for WCF to be more specific in order for it to be useful.

To narrow down our research, we chose specifically to focus on the two ways in which WCF can be given on writing, namely, direct corrective feedback and indirect corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009, Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) and how teachers reflect on what type they choose.

2.1 Research question

- What are primary school English teachers’ perceptions about WCF in order to promote their ESL students writing development?

- What are primary school English teachers’ perceptions regarding their choice between written direct CF or written indirect CF on their ESL students written production?
3. Theoretical background

The language learning theories, both in general and concerning writing development, that underlie the concepts used in this study are hereby unpacked in the following section. First of all we will unpack the theories behind what is generally seen as sound writing development from a first language perspective which is strongly connected to one’s writing development in a second language. After that we describe different purposes of writing activities in ESL and what theories might lie behind the approaches. Thereafter we discuss two major language learning theories, the sociocultural and the behaviouristic, and how their perspectives are connected to the feedback approaches investigated in this study. Finally, towards the end of this section, we discuss different perspectives of feedback leading us into a comparison of the two main written corrective feedback (WCF) approaches that is the focal point of this study, namely indirect WCF and direct WCF.

3.1 ESL writing development from a first language perspective

Swedish students listen to English music, watch English movies, follow English speaking social media influencers and read different English fictional stories online. It is with this in mind, that Lundahl (2014) states that “learning how to write will take much longer time than reading and listening comprehension” (Lundahl, 2014, p. 172). He means that everyone can understand more language than they can express and produce.

Learning how to write in a second language should therefore be based on your previous experiences and knowledge of, not just writing but, also reading, listening and speaking in a second language (Lundahl, 2014; Cameron, 2001).

Harmer (2001) suggests that if a student’s writing ability is not especially developed in their first language, then the writing production in the second language will also be underdeveloped (Harmer, 2001). This so called interference of one’s native language (more commonly referred to as one’s mother tongue), as something that indicates what difficulties you might
encounter, when learning how to write in a second language, is something Hadayati(2018) argues is important to keep track of as a language teacher.

Writing and creativity go hand in hand according to Vygotsky (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) and his sociocultural theory suggests that communication and interaction, even just within the classroom, is key for developing the ability to sort and process ideas. As children grow older, they develop the cognitive ability to “make sense” of the world (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.155) and learn how to express those thoughts by speaking and writing.

Cameron (2001) states that young language learners need to make use of their cognitive abilities and write not just because they need to but because they see a purpose of it. She claims that students should get the chance to process texts, write several drafts and edit them to produce a final written product since (Cameron, 2001).

3.2 Writing with different purposes

Students need to develop their written and spoken language with the help of a variety of activities in order for them develop skills to communicate at the best of their ability (Skolverket, 2011).

Writing activities can be anything from answering questions in a workbook, writing an argumentative text or writing independently by keeping a journal. Motivation to write is something most language experts (Lundahl, 2014; Cameron, 2001) emphasize as key in writing development. For children to be motivated and find the activities interesting it is crucial to blend different types of activities, texts and material (Lundahl, 2014) and when doing so one also has to have different focal points for the different activities.

Accuracy is the main focus when learning a language according to Cameron (2001) and for writing accuracy (Ferris, 2002) to be developed one has to explicitly point out grammatical errors and teach students how to avoid them (Gibbons, 2009; Cameron, 2001, p. 293).
When developing a writing ability in a second language one should not try to avoid complex concepts e.g. the array of linguistic features and grammatical rules encountered in any language, but instead concretize them for the students so that they can conceptualize, visualize and finally, utilize them (Gibbons, 2009 p.72).

However, not every activity can or should have grammatical correctness as the main goal and according to Krashen’s theories of second language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), the emotions students feel about learning a foreign language impact greatly on how they develop their different language skills, writing being one of them. He claims that their “affective filter”, meaning whether or not they are experiencing speaking and writing in the foreign language as enjoyable or not, is an important factor for how they acquire the language.

It all comes down to motivation and confidence about one’s language abilities, in which Krashen (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) firmly states that low self-esteem will lead to low motivation and, as already mentioned by Cameron (2001) and Lundahl (2014), this can have devastating effects on students writing development in the long run.

To encourage students’ motivation to write Cameron (2001) claims that one way of making it fun for them, could be through journaling. She further explains that such independent writing activities, where students can write about their own interests and experiences is a form of writing activity that should not be corrected and instead done for the fun of it (Cameron, 2001).

The process approach is explained by Keh (1990) as when the writer first comes up with ideas, usually followed by a mind map to organize the ideas, and then continues to write a first draft. Schallert and Lee (2008) explains that with process writing the content is considered to be the main focus. This is an ongoing process where student might write multiple drafts and receive direct and indirect CF on everything from the ideas, structure, content, grammar and spelling, and then their final product usually receives a summative grade or an endnote (Keh, 1990).
3.3 Different perspectives of feedback

3.3.1 Sociocultural Perspective

Vygotsky’s theory about learning a language through communication is something that Lightbown and Spada (2013) explain and discuss. Students that are supported by the teachers in their process of learning a language are likely to succeed in their language development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

From a sociocultural perspective, all types of support are not equally helpful. The support that is given should have the “Zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) in mind, referring to the student’s present ability and potential ability of competence. When it comes to feedback, it should be an ongoing process that meets a student’s current level and not something that is stationary and preset.

Seen from the sociocultural perspective, feedback should be given at the students’ ZPD meaning that they are challenged but also sufficiently scaffolded to reach their goals. When the student reach their current ability, the help should gradually be removed (Storch, 2018).

3.3.2 Behaviouristic perspective

Skinner’s language acquisition theory and the “principle of reinforcement” has had a significant impact on the feedback approaches some language teachers of today practice (Säljö, 2014). The power of receiving praise and “rewards” and being explicitly corrected is emphasized as being very effective on learners language development (Säljö, 2014).

From an educational perspective this means that when teachers give feedback in the form of praise, the students are likely to repeat the action. If the teachers do not praise, the student will not repeat the action (Säljö, 2014).
3.4 Feedback for different purposes

Different writing activities come with different purposes, some are, as mentioned in the previous section, mostly to motivate and encourage students writing in general.

Other activities are centred around reaching accuracy by attaining a certain phrase, sentence pattern or linguistic feature. The notion that one cannot learn correct language without being very explicit and pointing out grammatical features and addressing students’ errors is something Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) supports and emphasizes for writing accuracy to develop.

To further this hypothesis, research by VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) regarding language input, suggest that students are not able to focus on both form and meaning at once, and Gibbons (2009) theories about scaffolding languages for different purposes indicates that explicit teaching and learning by pointing out the language features, might be necessary when it comes to writing accuracy (VanPatten & Cadierno, Lightbown & Spada, 2013, Gibbons, 2009).

Nonetheless, no matter what the overall purpose of a writing activity may be, almost all teachers will give some form of feedback during or after it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), what makes any feedback, direct or indirect, successful, is when it answers these three questions: Where am I going?, How am I going? and Where to next? In their extensive research they show that different forms of feedback have different effects and can have either a positive or a negative effect on students learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

These different forms of feedback are often divided into one of two main approaches, namely, direct corrective feedback, or indirect corrective feedback (Sheen, 2007).
3.5 Different types of corrective feedback

There are two types of corrective feedback (CF), indirect and direct. As the name suggests, CF is feedback that is given with the purpose of correcting or addressing an error. Directly or indirectly, these two approaches can be given in written form, which is then called written corrective feedback (WCF).

In practicality, WCF is everything a teacher does in written form to either indirectly hint that an error has been made and what type of error it might be, or to directly tell the student about an error they have made and sometimes even correct it for them (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ellis, 2006).

Depending on if the teacher is providing students with indirect or direct WCF, the students will either see the answer right in front of them or have to think of it themselves. In some cases, the teacher might write comments and questions in the margin of a text as a way of indirectly hinting at the errors (Lee & Schallert, 2008). Sometimes they provide direct WCF in the margins as meta-linguistic explanations where they inform the student, in a more detailed fashion, what their error was and how it can be fixed.

Common ways of conducting WCF is when the teacher crosses unnecessary words, add the correct words, circle errors and partake in individual or group conferences where they explain the given feedback (Bitchener, 2008). However, nowadays with the modern technology, many teachers give their WCF through formats such as Google Docs and Google Drive.

When indirect CF is provided the teacher hints that an error has been made by color coding e.g. highlighting the word, sentence or paragraph with different colours for different meanings or using leading questions to hint at what kind of error has been made (Ellis, 2006; Bitchener, 2008). When CF is provided in the written form, it is referred to as written corrective feedback (WCF).
3.7 Direct vs indirect corrective feedback

There are some studies pointing to the value of WCF in writing development, however what kind of feedback, indirect or direct, that is advantageous is still an uncertainty (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010; Hanaoka and Izumi, 2012; Bitchener, 2012; Ferris, Liu Sinha, and Senna, 2013, as cited in Westmacott, 2017).

As mentioned in the introduction section, Truscott (1999) differs from most research within this field and is the only one who claims that CF, in both forms, is damaging for writing development and he argues that teachers should not focus on errors at all (Truscott, 1999). However, there is research (Fan & Ma, 2018; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006) that point to the possibility that CF could be beneficial in many language developing aspects. Ferris (2002) is one of many researchers who opposes Truscott’s conclusion (Truscott, 1999) and one of Ferris’ contentions is that direct CF helps second language learners improve by noticing specific linguistic features (Ferris, 2002).

Other opposers to Truscott (Chandler, 2000; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Lalande, 1982, as cited in Bitchener, 2008) who argue that students that receive CF on their writing have an advantage over the students who receive none.

Bitchener (2008) investigated the impact of different forms of CF in his study. He tested the accuracy of their use of a specific linguistic feature, namely: “a” and “the”, in their writing. In his study he had students divided into four groups whereas one received direct CF, one received direct CF plus an explanation and the third received direct CF plus both an oral and a written explanation and the fourth received no CF at all, this being the control group. Bitchener (2008) found that all three groups that received CF utilized it and became more accurate in their use of “the” and “a” and all three groups outperformed the control group which received no CF (Bitchener, 2008).

Some scholars such as Lundahl (2014) point to direct CF being more preferable for attaining a second language, especially during writing. He explains that students need see where their errors are and be given explicit explanations as to why it is an error and thereafter make the correction (Lundahl, 2014). Aligning with Lundahl (2014) is research done by Leki (1991)
and Bitchener (2008) which points to indirect CF being too unspecific which can make students confused since it does not give explicitly tell them what the error was and why it was wrong and it makes it hard for the students to understand how to revise their text (Leki, 1991; Bitchener 2008). On the other side, in a study conducted by Storch and Wigglesworth (2010), students wrote a text in pairs, received either direct or indirect CF and then discussed the given feedback. The students who encountered indirect CF tended to develop more advanced language skills, both oral and written, than those who received direct CF (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010). Sheen (2007) explains that it is not a case of one or the other type of CF being “the best” but rather that they benefit different types of students. According to Sheen, (2007) indirect is profitable to students with high proficiency and Ferris et al. (2013) agrees with this and further states that indirect feedback, using hints and codes to make the student understand that an error has been made, is more beneficial to students with sufficient grammar knowledge and the opposite learners profit from direct and uncoded feedback. Van Beuningen et al, (2012) also agrees with Sheen (2007) and further explains that it is not just a matter of high and low proficiency students but also a matter of what the goal of the writing activity is. He means that direct feedback is beneficial on accuracy of grammatical forms and indirect feedback is beneficial on accuracy on non-grammatical forms (Van Beuningen et al, 2012).

An issue with indirect CF is that it can lead to complications in interpreting the codes and hints (Westmacott, 2017). Bitchener (2012) theorized that students with a low proficiency gain more from direct CF since their language ability is not intensely processed.
4. Method

4.1 Participants and procedure

A targeted selection (Bryman, 2008, p. 434) was made when deciding participants for our study. Our focus were English teachers in grade 4-6 who used corrective feedback in their teaching. To find participants for our degree project we started to write an email where we wrote the purpose of our study and that we were interested in interviewing teachers in grade 4-6. We sent out emails to different schools in the vicinity of Malmö. We did not receive many responses, the majority of responses we got told us they were too busy and had a lack of time. Therefore, we started to contact teachers that we knew from work and VFU. Eventually we found interested teachers.

The participants we chose fulfilled the targeted selection (Bryman, 2008), all of them where English teachers and had worked with the grades 4-6 for at least a full school year. All of them had been working more than three years, all the way up to 17 years. Out of 12 possible participants we narrowed it down to seven teachers whom we contacted. Our decision of what participants to use depended mostly on whether or not they met our aforementioned requirements. However, some teachers were taken out of the equation due to issues with logistics and timing. We wanted to conduct as many interviews as possible in person, since it leads to deeper discussions (Bryman, 2008) and therefore we chose to exclude the teachers it would have taken too much time to travel to. We contacted our chosen, interested teachers via e-mail and we agreed on what day to conduct the interviews.

All the interviews took place during daytime in the school where the participated teachers worked at. We had participants from five different schools. The interviews took place in the teachers’ staffroom and available group rooms. The approximate time of each interview were 30 min. We wanted the teachers to feel free to speak and not feeling prevented by not knowing how to express themselves, therefore all of the interviews were performed in Swedish, therefore were transcribed it to English. Some of the teachers who took part in our interviews found it hard to specify their feedback and around the subject sometimes.
4.2 Semi-Structured interviews and instruments

We wrote an interview guide with suitable questions in relation to our research questions. We have chosen to conduct qualitative, in-depth, focused, semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2008). The purpose of our study is to find out teachers’ perceptions on how they give written corrective feedback (WCF), therefore found a reason to use qualitative, semi-structured interviews. We chose to have qualitative interviews on the basis of wanting more in-depth information about a few teacher’s feedback practices, rather than a large amount of information from a large number of teachers from all over the country by sending out inquiries for example. The qualitative characteristics makes it possible to have open ended questions which we prefer since we want the teachers to give their perceptions of their feedback.

Lack of time to actually perform such a quantitative research is also a decisive factor since it would undoubtedly have to take a large amount of time and effort just to find schools and willing teachers, send them the inquiries, give them time to respond and then decide which decoding and analyze procedure we would use to go through all of this material to finally get results that we could analyze. This procedure would have taken too much time that we need to spend on analyzing our results from a few interviewees instead. To record the interview, we used our personal phones, the recordings were later transferred to a computer.

4.3 Ethical consideration

We have had the ethical consideration in mind when performing our study. In first hand we provided the participants with information about our study which is the information condition, the second one is the permission condition, the participants must agree on participating in the research. Since we sent out inquiries, only participants who agreed on taking part in the study have taken part. The confidentiality permission is to keep the personal information private and unidentified. The information they shared are handled carefully. The teacher we interviewed all got pseudonyms when presenting them in this study, this too due to the utilization condition (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002).
5. Results & Discussion

This section will present, analyse and organize the findings from our interviews with seven teachers (whose pseudonyms we will refer to as Mia, Lisette, Johan, Sarah, Lisa, Mikaela, Miranda). From the findings we have unlocked two major themes in which we will organize this section in and we will discuss how our results are connected to the theoretical background.

In our theoretical background we uncover the two ways in which written corrective feedback (WCF) is given in most cases; indirectly and directly. These two approaches will be the focus of our discussion and are brought up within our major themes that emerged as we analysed our teacher interviews.

The two themes emerged as we saw a correlation between the thought process of our interviewees and the research about different forms of WCF.

Both our findings and the research point to indirect or direct WCF being given depending on what level of proficiency the language learners are at and what kind of writing activity they are currently partaking in, which suggests that the two approaches can be helpful in different ways, depending on the students and activities.

5.1 Different types of feedback for different types of students

Our findings and theories about how to best learn certain language features and consequently stop making certain errors, are aligned with Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) which suggests that nothing can be learned until it is ‘noticed’. If all types of students need this, in which degree they need it, which way you should make students notice errors and how much emphasis you should put on it do it, is however, not something everyone agree on (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).
Focusing on errors to a certain degree is expressed by most of the interviewees as something that is necessary to do, as expressed by Mia: “Otherwise, how will they know what to fix?” This argument aligns with Skinner’s behaviourist theories (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) by suggesting that students’ errors must be corrected, immediately and directly, to avoid bad habits to form (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Miranda, Mia, Sarah and Mikaela all thought that the direct feedback approach was more appropriate for less proficient students, whom need more support and can not figure out what errors they have made all by themselves.

The idea that one needs to provide different learners with different feedback, since some may benefit from direct and others from indirect, seem to be a recurring occurrence and Bitchener (2012) has posited that since “learners at a lower level of proficiency may not have such an extensive or deeply processed linguistic knowledge base to draw upon and direct feedback is in their case, the most likely approach to benefit their writing development” (Bitchener, 2012, p. 355).

A similarity between our findings and the results from previous studies is that high and low proficiency language learners need different levels of support. Sheen (2007) continues this argument by further stating that higher achieving students would benefit from indirect feedback, since it requires more independent thinking.

Those studies more positive toward a direct approach (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Komura, 1999) have explained that not only teachers, but also the students, find that direct feedback provides them with more explanations and a sense of “knowing what to do next” than indirect does. This aligns with Bitchener’s (2008) study and suggests that students need a more direct approach when it comes to feedback since it reduces confusion and lets them know what to fix and how to fix it, in opposition to the more implicit indirect feedback which only hints at what type of error it might be; spelling, vocabulary, grammatical etc.

Some researchers have suggested that indirect feedback would better promote the higher proficient students since it requires learners to think and reflect more and use their pre-
knowledge to solve the problems instead of being given the correct answers (Ferris et al., 2013; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

One of the interviewees, Miranda, states that by providing her students with indirect feedback, she knows they have to remember grammar rules and look in textbooks by themselves to try and figure out how to correct their text, however, she continues to explain that the issue is that they simply do not always have the time that it takes for the students to correct themselves and that doing it for them is easier.

In the Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) study, they examined two groups of students whereas one got indirect WCF and the other got direct WCF on a text they had written together. Their results showed that the ones who received indirect were able to discuss and reflect upon their text together, thus promoting language development and metacognitive grammar thinking skills (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010). This would suggest that the students, no matter what proficiency level, would benefit from indirect feedback.

Two of the interviewees, Lisa and Lisette, both share a similar thought process regarding their choice of indirect WCF for their lower proficiency students. They emphasize the importance of encouraging them by “positive reinforcement”, thus aligning themselves with the behaviourist theories of Skinner (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). They choose to focus on the positive when it comes to these types of students and do so by praise such as; “Good job!” and “Nicely done!”, usually as an endnote. They sometimes combine this with a few, specific corrections that address certain errors, however, in general they do not like to give these students too many corrections.

Regarding what type to use specifically on writing, Westmacott (2017) suggests it would be very likely that the learners with strong metacognitive knowledge of grammar would be the ones able to take advantage of indirect WCF. Students with little or no such cognitive ability may be expected to benefit more from direct feedback on their written production (Westmacott, 2017).

In alignment with this hypothesis, some of the interviewees take quite a strong stance against giving too much indirect WCF and emphasize how beneficial it has been for their students to
receive explicit direct WCF on their writing. One interviewee, Mia, firmly states that she always uses direct WCF on her lower proficiency students and emphasizes the importance for them to receive explicit information about their errors in order for them to learn from it and not make the same errors again;

Mia states:

I might mark the same type of error and explain to them over and repeatedly. Sooner or later it has an effect! Just might take quite a few times of them making the same error and me correcting it, but it does the trick eventually.

Sarah explains that the higher proficiency students receive less detailed feedback, since she wants to challenge them and not provide them with much support. The lower proficiency students receive more elaborate and detailed WCF than the higher proficiency students, since she believes they need more support. She also gives these students their feedback in individual conferences where she can explain it to them.

Westmacott (2017), Bitchener and Knoch (2010) and Ferris et al. (2013) strongly suggest that direct WCF, due to its preciseness and specificity, might be the most beneficial when it comes to writing accuracy, especially for the lower achieving students. They mean that direct WCF provides the learners with straightforward and clear information about what error has been made and how they should correct it. The lower proficiency students are, in Ferris (2002) opinion, not able to think metacognitively about their errors and thus, marking the errors but not providing the correct forms will not be beneficial for them (Ferris, 2002).

5.2 Different feedback for different writing activities

According to the syllabus for English (Skolverket, 2011), students need to be introduced to an array of different texts in order to become proficient English users (2011, p.36). A consensus among the interviewees, that aligns with the curriculum and with research about writing
development, points to the need of a balance between various activities to promote writing in the long run. There cannot be solely a focus on grammar activities and neither can there be no focus at all on grammar, thus suggesting there should be both indirect and direct CF, depending on what the end goal of the activity is (Hidayati, 2018).

Our findings suggest that the provision of either direct or indirect WCF highly depends on what writing activity the class is in engaging in at the moment. Some research (Beuningen et al, 2012; Ferris et al. 2013) suggests that if the purpose of the writing activity is to teach about a certain grammatical feature, it is preferable to be explicit, thus aligning with both Skinner’s theories of not forming bad habits and with Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Five out of the seven interviewees all agree that some focus on grammar is necessary if the students are to develop writing accuracy. They do however all point to the fact that it depends on what goals the activity has, thus agreeing with a large body of research such as Skehan and Foster (1997), Ellis (2009) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012).

The notion that one has to be explicit and provide direct CF when working with grammar is something Sanz and Morgan-Short (2004) and Van Beuningen et al. (2012) argue is important. Nonetheless, they express a concern that too much direct CF might lead to students becoming grammatically competent but communicatively incompetent, once again, suggesting a balance between the activities (Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2004; Van Beuningen et al, 2012).

It seems that our interviewees and some studies (Van Beuningen et al., 2011; O’Brien, 2004, Sheen, 2007) come to the same conclusion, that direct and indirect WCF can and should be given depending on what is relevant to the activity in hand. If the class is writing in journals as two of the interviewees, Sarah and Johan do consistently, our findings point to the preference of indirect WCF since the purpose is to motivate the students to enjoy writing and express themselves freely. They will not give their students any direct WCF on their independent writing, instead they will provide more informal questions and comments. Johan continues to explain that some focus on linguistic features is also necessary in ESL since it is difficult to develop a sufficient writing language without any target focus at all, a stance supported by Cameron (2001). Nonetheless, all writing activities have a different set of goals, whether that is one of grammar or of content. This suggests that some activities demand a
more form focused approach, e.g. direct CF and some can be more freely and revolve around developing all round communicative writing skills, e.g.: indirect CF (Fan & Ma, 2018).

When the goal is to develop a writing independency and enjoyment in expressing oneself, some research (Zamel 1982, 1985; Ali Mohammadi & Nejadancari, 2014) points to process writing activities as being preferable (Cameron, 2001). This perception that motivation and enjoyment is of importance is backed up by theorists such as Krashen (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The act of spending an extended amount of time on a text is, according to two of the interviewees, Johan and Miranda, what makes learners develop a sound sense of writing in a second language. Miranda incorporates both direct and indirect WCF into her independent writing activities.

She explains:

When writing a longer text, I have to give both types of feedback, sometimes I need to be specific and point out grammatical errors and sometimes I just want to encourage them and tell them how good they’re doing by something like ‘Very interesting plot twist!’ as an endnote.

Miranda explains that instead of only zoning in on one type of WCF, it seems as if this type of activity demands both types. Direct WCF to point out the language errors explicitly so that students can revise their text accordingly, but also some indirect WCF in the form of encouraging and positive comments (Cameron, 2001, Zamel 1982, 1985, Ali Mohammadi & Nejadancari, 2014).

Mikaela’s approach to direct WCF on independent writing differs significantly to that of the other teachers by the fact that, if the student’s texts have too many errors, she will correct the entire texts for them, by herself. She then lets them copy it word by word. This might seem unorthodox; however, she provides them with a thorough metalinguistic explanation during a student counseling meeting, and goes through all the errors, explaining them explicitly, one by one.
By doing so, Mikaela's method aligns with what Bitchener et al. (2005) discovered when he compared the effect of direct CF versus direct CF given with an metalinguistic explanation, and found that learners who received this direct feedback combined with an oral explanation significantly outperformed those who only received direct feedback, indicating that the addition of metalinguistic explanation does, in fact, make a difference to the reduction of error ratios (Bitchener et al, 2005). Mikaela finds this method to be very efficient on all types of students, when the goal is to obtain writing accuracy whilst writing independently.
6. Conclusion

In this following section we will present the results from our findings and summarize them within the two themes that emerged in our results and discussion section: indirect/direct CF depending on types of students or types of writing activities. We will try to answer our research questions within these two themes.

6.1 Different types of feedback for different types of students

Our teacher interviews reveal that the majority of them find it necessary to make a distinction between what kind of WCF they give, depending on what type of student. This is aligned with the findings from prior research as well. If the student is higher proficiency, they can benefit from indirect WCF since they have other metacognitive skills than the lower proficiency students have. The lower proficiency students benefit from more direct WCF since they need the higher level of support. In the regards of the research used in this study, primary school students fall into the category of lower proficiency since they are not as experienced in writing in a second language as the secondary and University students are. They run a higher risk of encountering issues with writing since they have had much fewer opportunities to write. This suggests that younger language learners would benefit from a more direct CF approach, as the research indicates that the older lower proficiency students need. Mia, one of the interviewees, stands firmly by this idea, that lower proficiency students need more direct WCF, on most writing activities. Miranda also stands by this notion and draws upon Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to suggest that in order to develop these students, they also need to be challenged, however always within their ZPD. She further explains that the difference, for her, between the lower and higher is that the lower proficiency students’ ZPD is not as flexible as that of higher proficiency students, meaning that they need to have a lot of support to be able to write.

To summarize, the students with higher proficiency and metacognitive thinking skills can handle the implicitness of indirect WCF since they can remember grammar rules and apply them to new tasks and thereby correct their errors by themselves. These students only need
some direction in the form of the teacher circling the error or underlining it, but not providing the correct answer,

The lower proficiency students, however, need the direct WCF because they are not able to remember complex grammar rules and apply them on their own and they would not be able to decipher the teachers indirect WCF. Two of the interviewees separated themselves slightly from this above-mentioned notion by explaining that they prefer to give their lower proficiency student, mostly, if not only positive indirect feedback. This means that they tend to focus on encouraging these types of students, and only directly correcting them on a few targeted features.

However, to promote writing accuracy, both type of students benefits from direct WCF since it is necessary to point out grammatical features to some degree, in order for the students to develop and move on to higher levels of proficiency.

6.2 Different feedback for different writing activities

All interviewees have in common that they give both indirect and direct WCF in their ESL classes. What type they give depends on what the focus and goal of the writing activity is. Most of the teachers believe that there is a need to focus on grammar from time to time, in order to develop the students writing accuracy, and with those kind of activities direct WCF often follows quite naturally. They argue that since you are being specific and explicit in your teaching of the grammar, you have to be quite specific in your correction as well.

Miranda and Mikaela both tend to give quite a lot of direct WCF during their writing activities, as mentioned by the majority of the interviewees, it will depend on whether the goals are writing accuracy or not. If that is the case, both interviewees claim that direct WCF is the only way to give feedback, on those specific activities with accuracy as the main goal.

Two of the interviewees, Johan and Sarah, practice a lot of independent writing for example in the form of journaling. In these activities they do not see a need for direct or indirect WCF,
since it would only hinder the students writing experience. Instead, they both provide their students with leading questions, a form of indirect feedback, although not corrective.

6.3 Limitations

Our study has a few limitations which do not enable us to draw any substantial final conclusions regarding Swedish schools in general and their use of direct or indirect WCF. One of these is the fact that our interview questions, although open ended to promote deeper answers, did not sufficiently provide us with the type of material we initially wanted since the interviewees tended to wander off topic quite a lot and discuss their views on language learning and writing approaches more so than their feedback approaches, which we would have needed to provide more concluding results. The second limitation is that we performed the majority of the interviews within the same region of Sweden which does not provide enough validity to the results as if we would have conducted interviews within a wider geographical range. A third limitation would be that our study does not combine any observation of classroom interaction or analyzing of students’ texts to really see how teachers give direct and indirect CF.

6.4 Further research

In accordance with our results we find that there is a need for more research within this field. As Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012) conclude, the evidence of the current research within WCF and its impact on writing development, is too scarce and consists of too many design issues, such as the lack of control groups in almost all studies, to be able to provide any real evidence to support or dismiss the value of WCF on writing development. A substantial body of research regarding the different effects of oral versus written feedback exists, however, they do not ask questions regarding if there is a need to have CF or WCF at all, thus we see a need for research that asks those questions as well. Furthermore, there is an overarching lack of empirical studies done on primary school students. The existing empirical data that is discussed in this study, is done on upper
secondary and university level English learners. We see a need for studies that combine a variety of methods such as classroom observations, interviews and questionnaires in order to get better results regarding primary school students as well. Based on our own and previous research it is sound to assume that the results from higher education can be seen as an indication of how WCF would affect younger ESL learners as well. This study shows that different forms of corrective feedback serve different purposes when developing writing, thus it would be useful to do studies on the effect of indirect and direct corrective feedback in the lower grades as well.
7. References


8. Appendix

8.1 Interview Guide

- Hur länge har du varit lärare i årskurs 4-6?
- Hur länge har du undervisat i just engelska?
- Har du under dina studieår någonsin fördjupat dig inom just engelska?
- Vad är dina tankar och erfarenheter om hur man utvecklar elevers skrivande i ett andraspråk?
- Vad för typ av texter och/eller skrivuppgifter arbetar ni med i engelska?
- Vad är dina tankar och erfarenheter om rättning/återkoppling s.k corrective feedback i engelska undervisning?
- Ger du corrective feedback på elevtexter? I så fall, hur gör du det och varför just den så? Skriftligt eller muntligt och vad avgör vilken typ du använder? (Skriftlig, muntlig, små kommentarer, rättning av stavning, fokus på grammatik fel etc)
- Ger du feedback under andra aktiviteter och uppgifter i engelska? I så fall, vilken typ och varför just den typen?
- Ger du olika typer av corrective feedback till olika elever beroende på om dem är högpresterande eller lågpresterande? Om så är fallet, varför? Varför inte?
- Förser du högpresterande och lågpresterande studenter med olika mycket mängd av corrective feedback? Om så är fallet, varför? Varför inte?
- Vill du att elever ska kunna applicera din feedback på andra, nya uppgifter? Om ja, hur ser du till att dem gör det och hur märker du att dem gör det?
Information to participants

2019-01-28

Förfrågan att medverka i studentprojekt

Hejsan, Vi är två studenter, Louise Nyström och Milanda Gultekin, från Malmö Universitet som läser Grundlärarprogrammet för årskurs 4-6 med fördjupning i engelska. Vi går nu sista terminen på programmet och ska påbörja vårt examensarbete. Vi har valt att rikta in oss på rättning och återkoppling (corrective feedback) på elevernas skriftliga produktioner i engelskundervisningen, för att synliggöra vad det är för typ av feedback de flesta engelsklärare ger på sina elevtexter. Vi vill därför undersöka lärarens uppfattningar och erfarenheter inom just feedback.


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Hör gärna av dig vid frågor och funderingar! Mvh!