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How do Chilean Pre-Service Teachers Correct Errors in Writing?

Como os professores chilenos em formação corrigem os erros na escrita?

Angie Quintanilla Espinoza*
*Universidad San Sebastián, Concepción / Chile
angie.quintanilla@uss.cl
Steffanie Kloss Medina**
**Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, Concepción / Chile
skloss@ucsc.cl

Pedro Salcedo Lagos***
***Universidad de Concepción, Concepción / Chile
psalcedo@udec.cl

ABSTRACT: Most research on error correction has dealt with feedback strategies used in the classroom and the effect of these strategies on students' performance. However, not much research has been conducted on pre-service teachers' actual competence on giving written corrective feedback. With this idea in mind, a study was conducted in order to investigate the way pre-service teachers of English correct students' errors in writing. For this, the participants were asked to complete an error correction task that required the teacher to mark a student's opinion essay in the way they would normally do as part of their teaching practices and to answer a questionnaire related to the way they had corrected the task. The results showed that most teachers tend to correct errors comprehensively, rather than selectively, opting for direct rather than indirect feedback strategies.

KEYWORDS: error correction; pre-service teachers; L2 writing; written corrective feedback strategies.

RESUMO: A maioria das pesquisas sobre correção de erros aborda estratégias de feedback usadas na sala de aula e o efeito dessas estratégias no desempenho dos alunos. No entanto, não foram realizadas muitas pesquisas sobre a competência real dos professores em formação ao fornecer feedback corretivo escrito. Com essa ideia em mente, um estudo foi conduzido para investigar a forma como os professores de Inglês em formação corrigem os erros do aluno na escrita. Para fazer isso, os participantes foram convidados a completar uma tarefa de correção de erros que obrigou o professor a marcar o ensaio de opinião de um aluno na forma como eles normalmente o fariam como parte de suas

práticas de ensino e responder a um questionário relacionado à maneira como eles corrigiram a tarefa. Os resultados mostraram que a maioria dos professores tende a corrigir erros de forma abrangente, em vez de seletivamente, optando por estratégias de feedback direto ao invés de indiretas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: correção de erros; professores em formação; escrita em L2; estratégias de feedback corretivo escrito.

1 Introduction

Traditionally, the focus on written corrective feedback (WCF) has always been on the effectiveness of different strategies on students' performance (CHANDLER, 2003; BITCHENER; YOUNG; CAMERON, 2005; SHEEN, 2007; ELLIS; SHEEN; MURAKAMI; TAKASHIMA, 2008; BITCHENER; KNOCH, 2009; SHEEN; WRIGHT; MOLDAWA, 2009; FERRIS, 2010; SHEEN, 2011). However, not much has been done regarding teachers' knowledge and actual practices in terms of error correction (LEE, 2003; 2004). Moreover, at the time when this paper was written, research on pre-service teachers had been limited to unveiling their beliefs in this area (ÇAPAN, 2014; SUÁREZ; BASTO, 2017).

In the Chilean context, this has been no different. Previous work has mostly been limited to contrasting the effectiveness of strategies in the learning of Spanish and English as a foreign or second language. Research on WCF in Spanish has been carried out by contrasting metalinguistic and non-metalinguistic direct corrective feedback (LAFLEUR; FERREIRA, 2016), by comparing direct and indirect metalinguistic feedback (FERREIRA, 2017), and by incorporating response time during error repair following the introduction of a modality of direct and indirect metalinguistic feedback (FERREIRA; OPORTUS; FUENTES, 2016). Likewise, studies in English have concentrated on direct and metalinguistic feedback (LILLO, 2014); indirect focused feedback with metalinguistic clues (ORTIZ, 2016); indirect WCF with indication and localization; and indirect WCF with indication, localization, and metalinguistic explanation (MUÑOZ; FERREIRA, 2017), as well as feedback without metalinguistic information, with metalinguistic explanation and computer-mediated strategies (LILLO; SAÉZ, 2017). By contrast, very little is known about teachers' feedback use (ARANGUIZ; QUINTANILLA, 2016) and pre-service teachers' actual knowledge and practices regarding error correction.

The core question in this study lies in how pre-service teachers correct errors in writing. The main purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of the way Chilean pre-service teachers correct errors in writing as regards the approach (focused or unfocused) and the strategies used, the accuracy of the feedback provided, their thoughts on error correction, and their training experience.

The present paper is divided into five sections, and it is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a brief literature review on the area of error correction or WCF. The methodology of the study is presented in Section 3. Section 4 analyzes and discusses the results obtained from the study. Finally, some conclusions are drawn in section 5.

2 Literature review

One of the problems observed in the writing processes in a foreign or second language is the lack of grammatical accuracy of learners. This lack of precision is evident from the mistakes a learner makes when performing writing tasks. It should be noted that this lack of accuracy can affect the message to be transmitted, and therefore hinder communication between writer and reader. In this context, Ferris and Roberts (2001) point out the fact that grammatical errors can be frequent or systematic, serious or stigmatizing, so it is necessary to support the learner to improve his performance in this area.

Regarding the grammatical errors present in a student's written production in a foreign language, there is controversy as to whether error feedback or written corrective feedback (WCF) is appropriate or counterproductive in the acquisition processes of an L2 (TRUSCOTT, 1996; 2007; FERRIS, 1999; 2002; 2004). Ferris (1999) argues that there is empirical evidence regarding the benefits of error correction, whereas Truscott (1996) claims that this correction would be ineffective and harmful to the learner. This author also points out that written corrective feedback promotes "pseudo learning", since it does not support a real development of grammatical precision, but rather develops self-editing and proofreading skills (TRUSCOTT, 2007). However, among authors who support WCF (HYLAND; HYLAND, 2006; FERREIRA, 2007; ELLIS 2009; SHEEN, 2011), it is pointed out that this correction informs the student about the differences between their production and the target language, which

encourages students to correct and maintain this response in the production of new texts.

In this context, the foreign language teacher must make various pedagogical decisions when faced with the correction of errors in the texts produced by his students. On the one hand, the teacher needs to decide on the type of strategies to use. In this regard, the literature indicates that the use of corrective feedback strategies that invite students to self-repair (prompting strategies) would be more effective in the grammatical forms addressed in the exercise than those strategies that provide the student with the correct answer in a direct way (FERREIRA, 2007; HYLAND; HYLAND, 2006; ELLIS, 2011; SHEEN, 2011).

On the other hand, another complex issue in the FCE area is the approach the teacher should take when correcting mistakes. The literature suggests that the focused approach, on one or a certain number of grammatical forms, would be more effective than the non-focused approach in the acquisition of such forms (ELLIS, 1997; FERREIRA, 2007; HYLAND; HYLAND, 2006; SHEEN; WRIGHT; MOLDAWA, 2009; SHEEN, 2011).

Finally, with respect to these decisions, Kotz and Ferreira (2013, p.220) point out that "despite the existence of different ideas about the correction of language errors, an undisputed argument remains; for a treatment to be effective and lead to a substantial improvement in linguistic accuracy, expert and personalized attention is required." The approach of these authors emphasizes the role of the teacher concerning error correction and the relevance of continuing research on teachers' corrective feedback practices and beliefs.

3 The study

3.1 Purpose of the study

The present study aims to examine the way pre-service teachers treat error correction in writing. As a result, the following research questions arise:

1. Do pre-service teachers mark errors comprehensively or selectively? Why?
2. Which error correction strategies do they use?
3. How accurate is the feedback they provide?
4. What do they think about error correction?
5. What type of training have they undergone in written corrective feedback?

3.2 Research instruments

To answer the research questions posed, an error correction task (LEE, 2003) and a questionnaire were designed. For the error correction task, pre-service teachers were required to mark a student's opinion essay in the way they would normally do as part of their teaching practices. After this task, they answered a questionnaire related to the way they had corrected the task, their perception on error correction and their training on written corrective feedback.

The text used in the error correction task (see Appendix A) was an opinion essay written by a student of English as a foreign language (A2 level-CEFR). The topic of the essay was *"Which kind of pet is best, a cat or a dog?"*. The essay is 198 words long (4 paragraphs) and the errors present in the text are mainly local errors, which are relatively easy to correct (LEE, 2003).

The questionnaire consisted of four questions (see Appendix B) that aimed to collect information regarding the error correction task and pre-service teachers' views on feedback. This set of questions appeared on the back page of the error correction task, and the pre-service teachers answered the questions once they had completed the task.

3.3 Participants

This study involved 33 pre-service teachers of English who were in the final stage of their teacher training, that is to say, they were part of an internship program. As for their level of proficiency in English, they all had an upper-intermediate level (B2 according to the Council of Europe level).

3.4 Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis was to identify and correct the mistakes present in the opinion essay that was part of the error correction task. For this, the text was read and marked by eight teacher educators, including the researchers. As a result, the researchers identified 25 errors in the writing, which were classified (error category) and corrected. Table 1 presents a summary of the error types found in the task.

TABLE 1 – Summary of error types in the error correction task

Error Type	Total
Subject-verb agreement	8
Punctuation	5
Spelling	4
Missing word	4
Word Choice	3
Verb Tense	1
Total	**25**

The errors identified in the essay, their corrections, and their classification according to the error type are listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2 – Analysis of errors in the opinion essay

Error	Line	Student error (underlined)	Correction	Error category
1	2	I never had	have never had	Wrong tense
2	2	friend who have a	has	Grammatical mistake
3	2	and other friend	another	Wrong word
4	3	friend who have a	has	Grammatical mistake
5	3	so thinking	so,	Punctuation
6	3	thinking	based	Wrong word
7	3	thinking on that I	that,	Punctuation
8	3	writte	write	Spelling
9	4	has a cat call	called	Grammatical mistake
10	4	cat he	cat,	Punctuation
11	4	he sleep	sleeps	Grammatical mistake
12	5	whe	when	Spelling
13	5	he wake	wakes	Grammatical mistake

14	5	up is just	up it is just	Missing word
15	5	for eat	to	Wrong preposition
16	5	he never play	plays	Grammatical mistake
17	6	is boring	he is boring	Missing word
18	7	of have	of having	Grammatical mistake
19	7	kine	kind	Spelling
20	7	of boring pet.	of a boring pet	Missing word
21	8	other hand Evelyn	hand, Evelyn	Punctuation
22	8	mane	name	Spelling
23	10	Leon always take	takes	Grammatical mistake
24	11	and is always	and she is	Missing word
25	12	In conclusion we	conclusion, we	Punctuation

4 Results

This section attempts to answer the research questions posed for this study.

4.1 Do pre-service teachers mark errors comprehensively or selectively? Why?

In the error correction task and follow-up questionnaire, 70% of the pre-service teachers (n=23) indicated that they had marked all of the students' errors, whereas 30% of the teachers (n=10) reported having marked just some of the errors present in the text. These results are consistent with previous results (SUÁREZ; BASTO, 2017) where pre-service teachers "believed that teachers must always correct students' mistakes" (p. 174).

The comprehensive feedback group stated that the reason behind this choice is related to the fact that students need to be aware of all of their mistakes in order to improve them. This stands in accordance with Lee's findings (2004, p. 293) where teachers expressed "it was their responsibility to point out all errors for students to let them know what errors they had made".

On the contrary, the selective feedback group suggested that not all mistakes need to be pointed out and that this selection depends basically

on the student's linguistic level. The teachers also suggested that errors should be corrected if they affect the meaning of the message or if they make sentences confusing. This group also insisted on the fact that marking too many mistakes can have a negative emotional impact on students (see Appendix B, question 1).

When asked about the criteria used to mark errors, the selective group indicated the following:

- Basic errors.
- Grammatical errors.
- Errors that affect meaning / comprehension of the message.

Our results share a number of similarities with Lee's (2003) findings, taking into consideration that the criteria for error correction were primarily based on the teachers' own perception of the nature of errors. On the other hand, Çapan (2014) found that pre-service teachers were uncertain in their beliefs about the type of errors that should be corrected. They believed errors that interfere with communication have to be corrected, although they were not certain if this was the only key issue in error correction. A different idea is proposed in Barnard and Scampton (2008), where only 43.8% of the participants agreed that teachers should only correct student errors of form that interfere in communication, whereas the majority (56.2%) disagreed with this statement.

When taking a closer look at the results, pre-service teachers who used a comprehensive approach corrected 342 errors, while those who used a selective approach corrected 144 errors. This means that averages of 14.8 and 14.4 errors were marked by the comprehensive and selective groups, respectively. These results suggest that those pre-service teachers who informed that they followed a selective (focused) approach corrected as many mistakes as teachers who preferred a comprehensive (unfocused) correction (for further discussion, see 4.3.)

4.2 Which error correction strategies do they use?

The results show that 30% of the pre-service teachers use indirect error correction while 70% use direct error feedback (see table 3). The indirect feedback group either made a direct location of the errors (circling or underlining) and used error codes to help students correct their mistakes, or just underlined the mistakes making no comments.

On the other hand, the direct group used direct correction (providing the correct form) or a combination of direct correction and error code.

TABLE 3 – Summary of feedback strategies used in the error correction task

Strategy	Evidence
30% Indirect	9 circling, underlining and error code 27% 1 underlining no comments 3%
70% Direct	21 direct correction 64% 2 error code and direct correction 6%

As both groups used error codes, the codes used in the error correction task were analyzed and summarized (see table 4). It is interesting to see different codes for the same error types (Grammar: Gr/Gram/G) or the same code for different error types (P= Punctuation/ Preposition). Given the fact that these teachers belong to the same program, these results could reflect that writing teachers from the program use different error codes when checking their students' work, and some of these codes might lead to confusion, for example, P= punctuation/ preposition or Pr= pronoun/ preposition.

TABLE 4 – Summary of error codes used in the error correction task

Error Type	Error code used
Grammar	Gr/Gram/G/
Agreement	Agr/AG
Wrong word	WW/W/w.w/
Punctuation	Punct/ P/
Preposition	P/Pr/Prep
Pronoun	Pr
Tense	T/WT/ VT
Article	A/ art
Spelling	S/Sp/Spel
Missing word	M/MW
Missing subject	Subject/MS

4.3 How accurate is the feedback they provide?

Lee's study (2003) was used as a framework to analyze pre-service teacher's feedback accuracy. These authors suggest four types of teacher's error feedback:

1. Accurate feedback: the teacher accurately locates, corrects, and/or codes the error.
2. Inaccurate feedback: the teacher accurately locates the error but he provides inaccurate correction or coding.
3. Unnecessary feedback: the teacher suggests changes in style or original meaning, or he creates an error where there was not one.
4. Omission: the teacher does not mark an error (when giving comprehensive feedback).

Table 5 shows accuracy in error correction in the comprehensive feedback group. These teachers corrected 342 errors, 93% of the feedback was accurate (318 errors), 0.6% was inaccurate (2 errors), and 6.4% (22 errors) was unnecessary. Teachers in this group were expected to correct 575 errors in total (25 errors*23 teachers), but they only corrected 320. This means there were 255 omissions that corresponded to 44% of the errors present in the corpus (11 omissions on average). Interestingly, 37% of the omissions corresponded to punctuation (94 errors). This means that only 21 punctuation errors were corrected by this group of teachers (1 correction vs 4 omissions on average). These results seem to be in agreement with Cassany's idea (1993), which specifies that orthographic errors, such as punctuation, are often neglected because teachers tend to focus on meaning rather than on form. Nevertheless, these results could also reflect negative transfer from L1 to L2 given the fact that this type of error is frequent in Spanish as an L1 (KLOSS, 2014). This might imply that the lack of knowledge in L1 punctuation could have affected pre-service teachers' accuracy when correcting in L2.

TABLE 5 – Comprehensive marking group feedback

Comprehensive marking group		
Accurate feedback	318	93%
Inaccurate feedback	2	0.6%
Unnecessary feedback	22	6.4%

On the other hand, the selective marking group corrected 144 errors, 87% of feedback was accurate, 2% was inaccurate, and 11% was unnecessary (see table 6).

TABLE 6 – Selective marking group feedback

Selective marking group		
Accurate feedback	126	87%
Inaccurate feedback	2	2%
Unnecessary feedback	16	11%

Table 7 shows that both groups of pre-service teachers (comprehensive and selective) provide highly accurate feedback, a small proportion of inaccurate feedback, and approximately 10% of unnecessary feedback.

TABLE 7 – Comparison between comprehensive and selective marking group

		Selective
Accurate feedback	93%	87%
Inaccurate feedback	0.6%	2%
Unnecessary feedback	6.4%	11%

This study reports much higher values for accurate feedback than those reported by Lee (2003), where only slightly more than half (57%) of the feedback provided was accurate.

4.4 What do they think about error correction?

In general terms, the pre-service teachers that participated in this study stated that error correction or WCF helps students be aware of their mistakes, which can lead to improving them in future writings. One of the pre-service teachers mentioned, "Students can notice what they are doing wrong and improve upon that in the next draft."

They also expressed the importance of correction or edition of the texts after receiving teachers' feedback. In this regard, another pre-service teacher suggested that "they need to pay attention to the correction; they have to identify the mistake and correct it. That helps."

Pre-service teachers who provided direct correction affirmed that direct correction is more helpful because students know exactly how to correct their own errors. One of the participants said: "Sometimes, students don't know how to correct the mistakes, so we have to help them providing the correct structure."

On the other hand, teachers who provided indirect feedback expressed that this particular strategy is more helpful in the long term due to the fact that students need to correct their mistakes using their own knowledge of the language system. In this respect, one of the subjects explained: "If I provide the correct answer, the student doesn't have to think about his error. That's not good for him. If he corrects the error by himself, then he is learning."

These findings correlate fairly well with Lee (2004) and further support the belief that error correction brings about student progress in writing accuracy. However, they are in contradiction with Çapan (2014), where pre-service teachers were uncertain about the effects of error correction on students' grammatical proficiency.

Another relevant idea that appeared among the group of teachers that corrected errors selectively is the fact that correcting too many mistakes can be frustrating for students (REID, 1998) and can therefore decrease students' motivation towards writing. In this respect, Ferris (2002) states that an unfocused approach can be harmful because teachers can get exhausted and students can feel overwhelmed.

4.5 What type of training have they undergone in written corrective feedback?

The data analysis shows that 76% (n=25) of the pre-service teachers reported having been trained in the area of error correction (WCF). Some of them stated that this training was part of their applied linguistics courses. By contrast, others merely claimed they did not receive any sort of explicit training, although their teachers corrected their mistakes using different types of strategies. This correction was considered to be a sort of "training", by the participants of the study.

The rest of the pre-service teachers (24%/n=8) informed not having undergone any kind of training in the area, nor did they consider teachers' correction to be "training".

As stated above, the participants of the study belong to the same program, so these results might reflect different perceptions and/or knowledge gained during their teacher training program.

5 Conclusions

The data collected in this research suggest that most pre-service teachers tend to correct errors comprehensively, rather than selectively, opting for direct feedback strategies over indirect ones.

Indirect feedback is limited to the use of error codes or underlining with no reference to the type of mistake. Regarding error codes used by teachers, we observed a wide range of error types and different types of coding for the same kind of mistake.

On the other hand, pre-service teachers' error correction is highly accurate; however, those who reported correcting comprehensively were not able to identify all of the mistakes present in the task.

In general, pre-service teachers believe that error correction is an effective tool to help students improve their writing skills. Even though they do not use the same strategies, they think WCF makes students aware of the inaccuracies present in their written production which leads to improvement in subsequent writing exercises.

Understanding the importance of "expert attention" regarding feedback (KOTZ; FERREIRA, 2013), teacher training programs should focus on developing pre-service teachers' competencies for selecting and using effective feedback strategies. Additionally, these teachers should

be given plenty of opportunities to reflect on their written production, individually and collaboratively, and to explore their own understanding of how feedback can help improve students' accuracy when writing in L2.

This study has yielded some interesting findings that shed light on how Chilean pre-service teachers correct students' errors in writing. Nevertheless, two limitations must be noted. First of all, the sample size is small and not representative. Second, the error correction task is based on an artificial marking exercise, which might not reflect pre-service teachers' normal practice (LEE, 2003).

Further study on the issue is warranted. The next stage of our research will be to pinpoint in-service teachers' error correction techniques and compare them with pre-service teachers in an attempt to identify if there are in fact differences between these groups that could be attributed to either teacher training or teaching experience.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Error Correction Task

Write an opinion essay using the following prompt: *"Which kind of pet is best, a cat or a dog?"*

Dogs are better pets than cats.

I strongly agree with the idea that dogs are better pets than cats. I never had a pet but I have a friend who have a dog and other friend who have a cat so thinking on that I can writte my opinion.

My friend Alexandra has a cat call Astro. Astro is a lazy cat he sleep all day and whe he wake up is just for eat, he never play with Alexandra. He is very cute but as a pet is boring, because my idea of have a pet is to play and have fun but Astro is kine of boring pet.

On the other hand Evelyn has a dog. His mane is Leon. Leon is a huge dog, he is very friendly and he is always happy. Dogs can take care of the house when people aren't at home. Leon always take care of the house. Evelyn is a dog lover and is always giving love to Leon.

In conclusion we have many reasons to say that dogs are better than cats. If one day I decide to have a pet I want something like Leon. I think that I'm a dog lover too.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Regarding this error correction task:

1. Did you mark all the mistakes or did you just select some of them? Why?

2. What areas did you decide to focus on?

Regarding feedback:

3. Do you think writing error correction helps students improve their writing? Why or why not?

4. Has your previous training given you any idea about how to provide feedback on student writing? Explain.

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