

# Written Corrective Feedback in the Work of Students at the University of Limpopo: Perceptions of First-entering Students

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore perceptions of written corrective feedback of English Second Language grammar of first-entering students at the University of Limpopo. Specifically, the study was designed to establish the views of first-entering students on the written feedback from their lecturers. This study, furthermore, endeavoured to respond to the widely-held views that students do not pay much-needed attention to feedback; that even if feedback is provided, some students do not know how to use it to improve their English grammar. Additionally, it was perceived that some lecturers do not invest sufficient time in the provision of a detailed, usable feedback. Lecturers were also invited to participate in the study to establish their position on the subject. This is a qualitative study which is reinforced by Assessment for Learning as its theoretical mainstay. It has employed classroom observation checklists as data collection tools. The study uncovered, among other aspects, that students view written corrective feedback as a tool that enhances their usage of English Second Language grammar. This dispels the long-standing perceptions that students are mainly interested in marks obtained from assessments and not necessarily in learning. It furthermore highlights the need to provide a detailed, timely and constructive written feedback in students' academic English grammar work.

## Keywords

corrective feedback, perceptions, assessment for learning, academic work, enhances

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## Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that feedback plays a significant role in the learning cycle. However, students and lecturers often express their dissatisfaction and frustration about the apparent ineffectiveness of the feedback procedure. Some students even go to the extent of protesting about its unhelpfulness. Spiller (2009) concedes that students report about not being properly guided on how to utilise feedback to improve their performance. Ferris (2004) confirms that there is, indeed, a debate about whether and how to give second language students feedback on their written grammatical errors that has been of considerable interest to researchers and classroom practitioners. Truscott (1999) claims that inadequate attention is afforded to grammar correction in writing courses whereas Winne and Butler (1994) state that feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies. These views emphasise the significant role played by feedback in any educational process in that it helps improve both students and lecturers' performance by revealing areas that need improvement and appreciating them where it is necessary. Writing is one of the most vital creative language skills. It is also one of the greatest productive vehicles for communicating ideas and thoughts (Kahraman & Yalvac, 2015:73). Sentences containing grammatical errors distort meaning hence the need for corrective feedback on grammatical errors. Bitchener and Knoch (2010); Loewen and Erlam (2006); Lyster and Mori (2006); Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) indicate that, in its explicit and implicit forms) corrective feedback relates to second language learning, because it conscientises students to second

language forms. This study aimed to explore perceptions of written corrective feedback of the English Second Language grammar of first-entering students at the University of Limpopo.

## Written Corrective Feedback

Written corrective feedback is pivotal to the writing process in that it helps harness students' writing skill. Through written corrective feedback, students are able to gauge whether or not they are on the correct writing performance path (Mi, 2009; Littleton, 2011). If their performance needs improvement, feedback helps them undertake corrective measures to improve their writing to acceptable levels.

## Teachers' Written Corrective Feedback

Written corrective feedback is, notwithstanding its flaws, still the most commonly used form of feedback that students receive in their written work from their teachers. Researchers such as Randolph and Lea (2010; Altena and Pica (2010), however, still continue to question its efficacy. The main reason is that teachers' written feedback is a complex area to traverse because of its vastness. There are different methods utilised in written feedback among which two stand out; direct and indirect feedback:

### *Teachers' direct written feedback*

...with direct teacher feedback the teacher provides the students with the correct form of their errors or mistakes whether this feedback is provided orally or written. It shows them what is wrong and how it should be written, but it is clear that it leaves no work for them to do and chance for them to think what the errors and the mistakes are" (Elashri, 2013:7).

However, Rymanowski (2011), and Ko and Hirvela (2010) argue that direct teacher feedback is not the most effective method of giving feedback to students' errors and mistakes. Clements (2010) adds that direct approaches of giving feedback do not tend to have outcomes which are adequate to lure students' attention to surface errors. The reason for this is because direct feedback does not provide an opportunity for students to think or do anything to rectify their errors or mistakes (Elashri, 2013:7).

#### *Teachers' indirect written feedback*

Elashri (2013) point out that there are two types of teacher's indirect written feedback; coded indirect feedback and uncoded indirect feedback. With coded indirect feedback, the teacher highlights the errors or mistakes of the student and furthermore, writes the symbol above the targeted error or mistake. The teacher then gives the composition to the student to think what the error is as this symbol helps the student to think. With uncoded indirect feedback, the teacher highlights or circles the error or the mistake without writing the right answer or any symbols. The onus rests with the student to notice the error or mistake and correct it (Seabi, Montle & Mogoboya, 2020). In indirect feedback, teachers respond to their students' errors by utilising symbols and codes that specify the site and kind of error. These symbols and codes, however, must be clear in a sense that it does not to confuse the students. Moser and Jasmine (2010) state that this approach is arguably the most effective than directly correcting the errors and mistakes. Ko and Hirvela (2010) aver that making a learner try to discover the right form could be often instructive to both learner and teacher.

#### **The Efficacy of Teachers' Written Corrective Feedback**

Effective written feedback can be utilised to promote learning. This means that feedback plays a significant role in engaging learners in the process of learning. Therefore, it is crucial for one to understand that feedback should not be viewed in terms of marks awarded or in any other form of reward given to learners, because if that is the case it might have a positive impact on learners that are doing well, yet have a negative impact on learners that are not attaining the required standard (Nyembe, 2012:36). However, Black (2003) argues that feedback given as reward or grades enhances ego rather than task involvement. It can focus pupils' attention on their ability rather than on the importance of effort and therefore, damage the self-esteem of low achievers. This proves that feedback needs to be planned in a way that can engage, motivate and improve students' learning (Kekana & Mogoboya, 2021).

#### **Written Corrective Feedback as Part of Formative Assessment**

Feedback forms an integral part of formative assessment procedure. According to Brookhart (2008), formative assessment provides data to facilitators and students about the progress of students in relation to classroom learning goals. Brookhart (2008:15) states that "from the students' point of view, the formative assessment script reads like this: What knowledge or skills do I aim to develop? How close am I now? What do I need to do next? Giving good feedback is one of the skills teachers need to master as part of good formative assessment". He further believes that the

strength of formative feedback lies in its own double-barrelled method of simultaneously emphasising both cognitive and motivational features.

#### **Theoretical Underpinning**

The study was underpinned by Assessment for Learning (Formative Assessment) theoretical principles. Assessment for Learning emphasises that effective learning takes place if there is effective interaction, scaffolding and feedback provided to students. A properly implemented Assessment for Learning can serve as a weapon that can drive learning in that it can be utilised to engage and motivate learners in the tasks set for them. Foci here are on the type of assessment designed to refine learning (Nyembe, 2012). It is important to note that learning, teaching and assessment are correlated, meaning that they work hand in hand. It is, therefore, essential in this report to shift the attention from traditional assessment, thus assessment of learning to assessment for learning. However, one must comprehend that both these types of assessment are interconnected (Nyembe, 2012).

Lambert and Lines (2000: 106) define assessment as "the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about learners' responses to educational tasks which is necessary when teachers are required to account to officials about their practice". Sieborger and Macintosh, (1998) purport that "to assess means to measure something, usually what is measured is what has been learnt, what can be remembered, what is understood, or what can be applied from what has been learnt in a different context". This means that assessment includes both those in more proper contexts and with formal actions involving written, timed tests which are marked under harsh conditions, and less formal settings involving reading learners' work and be attentive to what they say (Nyembe, 2012). In accordance with these accounts of assessment, it is relevant in this study to establish various ways in which teachers give feedback in formative tasks in their desire to improve learning. As the primary aim of feedback is to improve and develop learning, students' responses to various kinds of feedback will be assessed to establish which kinds of feedback are best to develop learning.

Lambert and Lines (2000:106) suggest four significant purposes of assessment:

- Assessment should play a formative role by providing feedback to teachers and pupils about progress in order to support future learning;
- Assessment should provide information about the level of pupils' achievements at points during and at the end of the school year (Summative);
- Assessment should identify learning difficulties (Diagnostic); and
- Assessment should judge the effectiveness of local education authorities, schools and teachers by using assessment data as performance indicators.

In education it is significant to look at what an assessor does in class in order to use assessment as a tool to improve learning. This is because an assessor "is a judge or someone who estimates the value of something" (Sieborger & Macintosh, 1998:5). Through formative assessment one can measure learners' understanding of concepts by asking them

questions which uncover their misconceptions. If teachers or peers ask questions that engage learners and make them think, then there is a possibility of correcting their misconceptions and of deepening their understanding.

### Research Methodology

Patton (2001) describes methodology as the more practical branch of the philosophy of science that deals with the methods, systems, and rules for the conduct of an inquiry. Therefore, the research methodology that was used to guide the study is qualitative method. Qualitative method was used and followed in this study to establish the views of students and lecturers of the English course (HENB 011/ HENB 012) at the University of Limpopo about written corrective feedback, particularly with regard to the grammar and sentence structure. Qualitative method, buttressed by exploratory research design, was suitable for this study because, “its aims are directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research of participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories” (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Furthermore, the qualitative method was appropriate for this study because it provides detailed information about the research topic. The method also allowed the participants to give information and expand it at their own will.

#### Population

Research population is the “total number of units from which data can be collected”, such as “individuals, artefacts, events or organisations” (Parahoo, 1997). The research population is further described as the elements that satisfy the criteria for inclusion in the study (Burns & Grove, 2003). The population in this study comprised seven (7) lecturers and two hundred and eighty (280) first-year students enrolled for a first-year English course (HENB 011/012) from the University of Limpopo in the Limpopo province, South Africa. These participants were chosen because it was a class of first-year students who possibly needed additional support in written academic English feedback. This population was gender-inclusive. It was hoped that this total population of two hundred and eighty (280) students and seven (7) lecturers would produce reliable results. The students and lecturers had already done extensive work in the first semester for HENB 011.

#### Sampling

Kumar (1999:148) defines sampling as “a process of selecting a few (sample) from a bigger group (the sampling population) to become the basis for estimating or predicting a fact, situation or outcome regarding the bigger group”. A sample is described as a subset of individuals from the selected population to be part of the study (Bret & Bret, 2011: 7). Additionally, the study applied a convenience sampling, as the groups which were sampled (and were representative of the study population) were accepted as they were on the day that the researchers attended the classes for collection of data. Convenience sampling (also known as Haphazard Sampling or Accidental Sampling) “is a form of nonprobability or non-random sampling where

individuals of the target population that encounter certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are encompassed for the purpose of the study” (Dörnyei, 2007:10). The sample of this study included lecturers of English and a group of first-entering students who had enrolled for a one-year English Course: English for the professions, coded as (HENB011/HENB012). The sample was made up of three (3) lecturers and one hundred and twenty (120) students who were registered for the first year English course (HENB 011/ 012). This sample was extracted from a total population of two hundred and eighty (280) students and seven (7) lecturers. The sampled students were divided into three (3) groups of forty (40), each tutored by a different lecturer.

### Data Collection

Burns and Grove (2005) describe the collection of data as a systematic process whereby researcher(s) gather appropriate information to accomplish the study’s purpose and objectives. Researchers got permission from Head of Department of Languages (English Studies) to collect data from the selected English classes (HENB 011/012). Observations, with a checklist, were used to collect data.

#### Observation(s)

Creswell (2003) states that observations are the conscious noticing and detailed examination of participants’ behaviour in a natural environment. In this study, researchers observed written feedback from lecturers to students as well as establishing how students respond to and interpret that feedback from their lecturers. Researchers employed a checklist during the observation in three (3) different HENB 012 classrooms.

### Data Analysis and Presentation

Data analysis refers to “the process whereby order, structure and meaning are imposed on the mass of data collected in a qualitative study” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010:35). In this study, data from classroom observation checklists was analysed and presented as follows:

#### Classroom one (1)

During HENB012 lesson which was observed, the lecturer asked the students to do an activity. It was noticed that the students took a lot of time doing the activity. The lecturer also took a lot of time talking about general stuff were not academic and subject-related. Researchers observed that some students did not bring their study and writing materials to class hence their inability to participate actively in the classroom activities that the lecturer gave to them. They could not do their activities in the book. It was, furthermore, noticed that when the lecturer discussed answers to the activity and a student provided partially correct ones, that lecturer would seek a better answer from other students instead of offering corrective feedback to the student in the exercise book or even on the board. In other words, there was inadequate corrective written feedback that was used (see the checklist for class 1 in Table 1 below).

**Table 1 (Class 1): Written corrective feedback in the written work of first- entering students at the University of Limpopo: perceptions of students.**

	YES	SOMETIMES	NO
1. Is there any use of written corrective feedback?		✓	
2. Do learners understand the kind of corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers?		✓	
3. Do learners benefit from the given corrective feedback?			
4. Are there any difficulties that lecturers encounter when applying corrective feedback in the classroom?			
5. Is corrective feedback useful or effective in classroom interactions between learners and lectures?			✓
6. Do learners respond to the corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers?			✓
7. Does corrective feedback help students correct where they made mistakes?		✓	
8. Does corrective feedback motivate students' performance?		✓	
9. Does the lecturer give more comments about corrective feedback concerning content, writing and grammar?		✓	
10. Is corrective feedback regularly used in the classroom?		✓	
11. Do students pay attention when receiving corrective feedback?		✓	

*Classroom two (2)*

During class two (2) lesson, it was observed that some of the students were playful while others were very attentive. It was also noticed students took a long time to complete activities given to them by their lecturer. Furthermore, it was observed that when the lecturer asked students to do some activities from their course pack materials, most of them did not do them because they did not bring their learning materials to class.

It was again observed that some students were just not willing to participate when asked to do the activities and when they were asked questions they just keep quiet the

whole time. It was noticed that when a student committed an error, the lecturer would help them work on the error by rewriting it (the error) on the board and correct it for the benefit of the student. Additionally, when some students made mistakes answering some questions, the lecturer would redirect such questions to the whole class for them to assist struggling students with correct answers. It was also noticed that if the whole class struggled to write correct answers, the lecturer would come to their rescue so that they can all make the corrections (see the checklist for class 2 in Table 2 below).

**Table 2 (Class 2): Written corrective feedback in the written work of first- entering students at the University of Limpopo: perceptions of students.**

	YES	SOMETIMES	NO
1. Is there any use of corrective feedback?		✓	
2. Do learners understand the kind of corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers?			✓
3. Do learners benefit from the given corrective feedback?			✓
4. Are there any difficulties that lecturers encounter when applying corrective feedback in the classroom?	✓		
5. Is corrective feedback useful or effective in classroom interactions between learners and lectures?			✓
6. Do learners respond to corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers?			✓
7. Does corrective feedback help students to correct where they made mistakes?		✓	
8. Does corrective feedback motivate students' performance?		✓	
9. Does the lecturer give more comments about corrective feedback concerning content, writing and grammar?		✓	
10. Is corrective feedback regularly used in the classroom?			✓
11. Do students pay attention when receiving corrective feedback?			✓

*Classroom three (3)*



It was noticed that the lecturer was the one who initiated the day's lesson by introducing what it entailed. Students just listened and followed the lecturer. In this class, students were very determined and took their schoolwork seriously. It was also observed that they participated actively in every activity that they were given by their lecturer. The lecturer wrote the activity of the day on the board and asked students to come and write their answers on the very board. If a student gave an incorrect answer, the lecturer would stop them and ask for the correct answer from the classmates. If they too fail to provide the correct answer, the lecturer would intervene by assisting them with the correct answer. It was also noticed that when students got the answer in a sentence right, the lecturer would appreciate them with words such as "good" or "correct" and write that correct sentence on the board. It was also observed that when students misspelled words on the board, the lecturer stopped them immediately and offered them the correct spelling (see the checklist for class 3 in Table 3 below).

**Table 3 (Class 3): Written corrective feedback in the written work of first- entering students at the University of Limpopo: perceptions of students.**

	YES	SOMETIMES	NO
1. Is there any use of corrective feedback?		✓	
2. Do learners understand the kind of corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers?	✓		
3. Do learners benefit from the given corrective feedback?	✓		
4. Are there any difficulties that lecturers encounter when applying corrective feedback in the classroom?			✓
5. Is corrective feedback useful or effective in classroom interactions between learners and lectures?	✓		
6. Do learners respond to corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers?	✓		
7. Does corrective feedback help students correct where they made a mistake?	✓		
8. Does corrective feedback motivate students' performance?	✓		
9. Does the lecturer give more comments about corrective feedback concerning content, writing and grammar?		✓	

10. Is corrective feedback regularly used in the classroom?		✓	
11. Do students pay attention when receiving corrective feedback?	✓		

### Findings

The aim of this study was to explore perceptions of written corrective feedback of the English Second Language grammar of first-entering students at the University of Limpopo. The objective was to observe the efficacy of written corrective feedback given to students by their lecturers through an observation checklist which was used in three (3) HENB012 classrooms sampled out of seven (7) with forty (40) students each sampled out of a total population of two hundred and eighty (280) students.

In in the three observed HENB012 classrooms, it was established that there was little written corrective feedback that was used. Some of the students were also reluctant to participate in class activities. It was noticed that when the student committed an error, the lecturer would try to help the student to work on the error by re-writing that error on the board or in their exercise books for them to see where they went wrong and effect corrections. The lecturer would, at times, redirect the question to the whole class so that they could help the struggling student by providing the correct answer. It was also noticed that if the whole class struggled to come up with the correct answer, the lecturer would intervene by writing it on the board for students to all do corrections. It was also observed that when students gave correct answers, the lecturer would congratulate them by writing the words "good" or "correct" in the exercise books. It was further established that when the students misspelled words on the board, the lecturer stopped them immediately and wrote the correct spelling on the very board. even if the answer is wrong. It was also revealed that some students paid little or no attention to the written corrective feedback given to them by their lecturers. These are students who displayed lack of seriousness in their work. Similarly, some lecturers would give little or vague and confusing written feedback to students, to their deep frustration (see checklists 1,2 and 3 as tables 1,2 and 3).

Significantly, it was found out that the kind of feedback which lecturers should give to students should contain corrections in text or in content so that students can quickly link with sections that they got wrong in order to rectify their mistakes. This means that as long students are given written corrective feedback which is unambiguous in their written work, they will be able to revisit the work to check where they went wrong and correct the mistakes (Kekana & Mogoboya, 2021). In this way, students writing skill will immensely improve.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore perceptions of written corrective feedback of the English Second Language grammar of first-entering students at the University of Limpopo. The findings of the study revealed that during classroom observation, students were not given enough written corrective feedback. Notwithstanding this aspect, both students and lecturers viewed written corrective

feedback as a beneficial tool that improves their English grammar, rectifies their spelling errors and also make things easier for students to recall and remember their work. Therefore, the use of written corrective feedback does make things easier for students to cope and be encouraged to do better in class. Students and lecturers' perceptions matter because they help unveil things that are very useful in the learning and teaching environment. However, more research is necessary to close such gaps as some students' unwillingness to use corrective written feedback in their learning, and some lecturers' vagueness when it comes to offering students effective written corrective feedback. This will go a long way in enhancing the efficacy of written corrective feedback in English first-year classrooms.

### Recommendations

The study revealed that there is inadequate written corrective feedback given to first-year students of HENB 012. There is, therefore, a need for lecturers to provide more written corrective feedback to students, so that they can engage with that feedback. Researchers observed that some students did not bring their study and writing materials to class hence their inability to participate actively in the classroom activities that the lecturer gave to them. Therefore, there is a need for lecturers to encourage students to come to class with the course pack so that they can assist them with activities and provide written corrective feedback where necessary. Lecturers should also allow time for more interaction and engagement with students.

The study indicated that students and lecturers view written corrective feedback as a tool that can improve their English grammar, rectify their spelling and make things easier for them to learn how to write in English. For this reason, lecturers should be encouraged to provide clear written corrective feedback to students.

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