

# Treatment Strategies for Language Problems in ESL Academic Writing: Teachers' and Students' Preferences

*Meenakshiyogini (Meena) Balachandran*

**English as a Second Language**

**Supervisor:** Jim Hu

**Abstract:**

*Aptly put by Dana R. Ferris (2014), the purpose of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers giving feedback to their students in academic writing courses is “not just about eradicating errors in writing but also about helping their students to develop control of academic language” (p. 69). However, are the present strategies for giving feedback on language problems in academic writing moving towards this goal? Do the end-users of these strategies - the students - see their writing improve over time? If not, what kind of guidance are students looking for? This study aims at addressing these questions by doing a comparative study of the feedback strategies used by teachers and those preferred by students. Their responses are further analyzed to study whether the preferences change with types, frequency, and timing of language problems, and whether there are other modes of feedback that are equally if not more effective. Drawing on the responses received from teachers and students, the study presents critical implications of such a comparison between the preferences on ESL academic writing pedagogy and provides practical suggestions for the teaching faculty.*

## Definitions

While the research focuses on language problems and feedback strategies for second language (L2) writers, it is imperative to clearly define what the terms ‘language problems,’ ‘feedback strategies,’ and ‘L2 writers’ mean in this study’s context:

- **L2 or Second Language Writers:** Although the meaning of this term might seem apparent, there are three visibly different categories of L2 writers:
  - **“International/visa students”** - pursuing education in an English-dominant country where English is the relevant L2. Also called eye-learners, these students have already learnt some part of the L2 in their home country. Their L2 instruction involved formal grammar instruction and an emphasis on grammatical rules and terms. Consequently, they often enjoy a more structured approach to language instruction as this is how it was back home. (p. 4)
  - **“Resident immigrants”** - arrived in the English-dominant country as adolescents or young adults. Also called ear-learners, these students have very little knowledge of their first language or L1 and hardly know anything about the L2. They don't know the grammar rules or terms as much as the international students do. They know what sounds right based on their interaction with native residents and not based on what they have read or seen. (p. 5)
  - **“Children of resident immigrants”** - arrived in the English-dominant country at a very young age or who were born in the new country. Known as generation 1.5, these students have lived in the new country from a very young age and hence they have never been educated in a language other than the L2. (p. 5)

This diverse background of L2 writers has a bearing on L2 teachers in two major ways: the same feedback strategy might not work for all students; and to be really effective, teachers might have to conduct a comprehensive analysis of their students’ previous knowledge of the L2, the mode of instruction they were taught in, and the areas that they are confident in and those that they need more work in. (Ferris, 2014, p. 4-7)

- **“Language Error”:** Defined by Ferris (2014) as “morphological, syntactic, and lexical forms that deviate from rules of the target language, violating expectations of literate adult native speakers.” (p. 3) A morphological error – where the student forms and

structures words incorrectly – would be using the wrong plural suffix (example: childrens) or the wrong form of a past tense (example: putted) and so on (Jamie, 2008, n.p.). A syntactic error comprises errors such as incorrect order of subject and predicate in a sentence. (Shoebottom, 1996-2015, n.p.) A lexical error is when the student chooses the wrong word in the given context of the sentence. (Ray, 2010, n.p.)

In this research, analysis has been conducted on morphological, syntactic, and lexical errors, along with errors in spelling, punctuation, and upper/lower cases.

- **Language Problem:** This study has gone beyond the realm of the above definition of an error and has included other issues that students have with academic writing. These include using colloquial forms, questions in an essay's body, personal expressions, choppy sentences, and unclear expressions (Hu, 2011).
- **Feedback Strategies:** Some of the common error treatment strategies focused on are –
  - **“Indirect vs Direct Feedback”**– When teachers give indirect feedback, they indicate that an error has been made through circling, highlighting, underlining, or otherwise marking its location in a sentence, with or without a verbal reminder or an error code. The students are required to analyze the errors and make corrections themselves. On the other hand, when teachers give direct feedback, they clearly mark out the errors and also give the correction which students can transcribe onto the next draft. (p. 93)
  - **“Error Locating vs Error Labelling”** – Teachers either locate the presence of an error by circling it, highlighting it, or putting a checkmark in the margin; or label the errors using symbols, codes, or verbal comments. (p. 97)
  - **“Marking Broader vs Narrower Categories of Errors”** – Teachers have the choice of either marking all types of errors in a student's paper or selectively mark errors based on certain criteria. (p. 100)
  - **“Codes vs Verbal Comments”** – For more efficient correction, teachers use codes for each type of error, such as ‘VT’ for verb tense errors. Alternatively, they can use verbal comments in the margin. (p. 101)
  - **“Textual Corrections vs Endnotes”** – Teachers can either mark errors in the form of labels, codes, or verbal comments exactly where the error lies, or they can

write a summary of their comments at the end of the students' papers. (p. 102; Ferris, 2014, p. 93-102)

## **Background**

This study was conducted at a Canadian university offering English for academic purposes (EAP) at five levels. Based on their performance on the Accuplacer, an English placement test, or TOEFL/IELTS scores, incoming students are categorized into basic-level 1, pre-intermediate-level 2, intermediate-level 3, advanced-level 4, and academic-level 5. A brief about the writing content taught at each of these levels is as follows:

- **“Basic - Level 1:** developing sentence structure; writing basic paragraphs to express the main idea in topic sentences”
- **“Pre-intermediate - Level 2:** recognizing and practicing grammatical structures and sentence patterns; introducing pre-writing and revision strategies”
- **“Intermediate - Level 3:** focusing on academic writing; introducing essay writing
- **Advanced - Level 4:** planning, developing, and revising of multi-paragraph compositions; practicing editing”
- **“Academic - Level 5:** reading, researching, discussing, and working co-operatively as part of the composition process”

Once ESL students successfully complete the level 5 course, they can apply for the Academic Writing course required for all academic programs at the university. (Thompson Rivers University [TRU], n.d.)

## **Literature Review**

Almost all ESL teachers nowadays agree that error treatment in ESL academic writing is a must and is important to a student's language growth. However, ESL theorists a few decades ago thought very differently.

Before the 70s', English academic writing for L2 students was almost all about mastering the language and its various forms, along with acing the vocabulary. Consequently, there was utmost importance given to correcting errors and making students understand the nuances of English grammar. In the 70s' though, the focus gradually started moving from the language to the writers themselves; language was starting to be seen as a mode of learning and not the

learning itself. Concepts such as ‘ideas,’ “creativity,” and “academic freedom” were taking shape, the presumption being that if L2 writers were allowed to choose their topic of writing, they would be motivated enough to produce a good document and language errors would be taken care of in the “editing” phase. This view, however, did not gain acceptance by all in the ESL community. (Ferris, 2014, p. 7-9) As Ferris (2014) points out, “because L2 students, in addition to being developing writers, are still in the process of acquiring the L2 lexicon and morphological and syntactic systems, they often need distinct and additional intervention from their writing teachers to bridge these gaps and develop strategies for finding, correcting, and avoiding errors.” (p. 9)

Over the years and after much research into the benefits and disadvantages of error correction and feedback, it has been widely acknowledged by the L2 teachers’ community today that error correction is an important component of second language acquisition for the following reasons:

- “Error feedback helps students revise and edit their texts”. In the “short-term,” giving feedback on errors can prove beneficial by making students fairly aware of their strengths and opportunities to work on. (p. 12)
- “Error feedback leads to accuracy gains over time”. Several studies have showed that “using a controlled quasi-experimental approach with a pre-test/post-test/delayed post-test design, when corrective feedback was limited to several discrete categories (e.g. definite and indefinite articles), students receiving error feedback substantially outperformed those who received no feedback on both post-tests and delayed post-tests.” (p. 12)
- “Students and teachers value error feedback”. This argument can be traced back to the fact that a majority of the L2 writers in Canadian universities belong to the ‘international/visa students’ category who, as previously mentioned, are used to a formal method of language instruction in which error feedback plays a vital role. Moreover, L2 teachers feel that not giving error feedback could have a direct correlation with falling short of students’ expectations. (p. 13)
- “Written accuracy is important to the real world”. It is true if one says that knowing one’s content is not enough; to be able to effectively communicate it is key. Be it the academic

or the employment world, written accuracy is a sign of clarity in ideas and organization of thoughts. (p. 14) In Ken Hyland's 'Faculty feedback: Perceptions and practices in L2 disciplinary writing', he interviewed teachers from various disciplines to get their views on the importance of written accuracy. To quote an Economics teacher, "I would say the most important thing to learn is the conventions of argument. The students need to learn how to write a persuasive argument, providing evidence to support their arguments, evidence that has been obtained through reasonably good research. What is less important for me is creativity." (Hyland, 2013, p. 244). It is evident from this that expectations from L2 writers are very high and at par with native English-speaking the students. (Ferris, 2014, p. 12-14)

Now that it has been established that error treatment is required for L2 writers, the question that is being asked by way of this research is, how should teachers give feedback on these errors? Should the feedback strategy change based on certain factors such as the type of problem, the frequency of the problem, and the timing of the problem during a semester? Is only written feedback effective or are there other ways of giving feedback? What do the L2 writers prefer: do they find the existing feedback strategies conducive to their language development? And most importantly, what are the implications for academia if teachers' and students' preferences for feedback strategies differ? While research has investigated the views of L2 writers on error feedback strategies in academic writing (e.g., Hu, 2015; Lee, 2005, 2008; Leki, 1991) as well as L2 teachers' beliefs on how to respond to language problems, (e.g., Ferris et al., 2011; Lee 2009), little research has directly compared teachers' and students' preferences. This study attempts to fill this gap by understanding whether there are discrepancies in the preferences and if so why and what can be done by students and teachers to bridge these differences in ways that are beneficial to both.

## **Methodology and Participants**

### *Methodology*

Four teachers teaching ESL academic-level 5 writing in a Canadian university were approached for the study. They in turn recommended two or three students from their respective classes to participate in the study. The data was collected in the form of personal, semi-structured qualitative 30-minute interviews with the students and the teachers at a location within the

university. All the conversations were audio-recorded and kept confidential. In order to conduct the interviews, ethics approval was sought from the Research and Ethics Board of the university. All the teachers and students were made to sign a consent form indicating that their identities will be kept anonymous and that they are under no duress to participate in the study. As teachers were recommending students for the research, an additional clause was added in the teachers' consent forms that there will be no coercion or impact on the students' grade or progression if the students wished to withdraw or do not want to participate.

### *Participants*

All the teachers had the required qualifications to teach ESL and at least five years of experience in teaching L2 writers. The table below gives brief details about the teachers interviewed in this research.

Table 1: Teachers' Information

	Gender	Highest Academic Degree	# of Years Teaching ESL/EFL at TRU	# of Years Teaching Level 5 Academic Writing at TRU
A	Male	M.A. Applied Linguistics	8	4
B	Female	M.A. Applied Linguistics	8	1.5
C	Female	M.A.T	20	5
D	Female	M. Ed.	26	9

As for the students, there were some important common features that drove the results of this study:

- A majority of the students belonged to the “International/visa students” category of L2 writers. In their home countries, they had studied English in high school with prominence

being given to grammar and vocabulary. However, it is the lack of application of the rules in real-time contexts that makes them reluctant to confidently use the language.

- Error correction was a major component of language instruction for everyone, though students were rarely given a chance to rework their drafts. There were few opportunities to have one-on-one conferences with their teachers regarding language clarifications.
- Only one-third of the students had taken a prior grammar class in this university and were therefore familiar with the grammatical rules. For the others, their grammar knowledge had fossilized.



Table 2: Students' Information

Participant	Gender	Native Country and First Language	ESL Courses Taken Before	Academic Program Taken
A	Female	India, Hindi	-	Post Bacc. in Marketing
B	Female	China, Mandarin	Level 4 Grammar, Writing, and Reading	M. Ed.
C	Male	Russia, Russian	Level 3 Grammar, Writing, and Reading Level 4 Writing and Reading	Masters in Comp. Science
D	Female	China, Mandarin	Level 4 Writing and Reading	M. Ed.
E	Male	China, Mandarin	Level 3 and Level 4 Grammar	Masters in Comp. Science
F	Male	China, Mandarin	Level 4 Writing and Reading	Diploma in Tourism
G	Female	China, Mandarin	-	M. Ed.
H	Male	Saudi Arabia, Arabic	Level 4 Grammar, Writing and Reading	M.B.A.
I	Male	India, Gujarati	-	Masters in Comp. Science

### Limitations

The study was conducted in a Canadian classroom setting where the principles and methodologies of teaching are mostly North American. This might not encompass a large part of

the teaching strategies used in other parts of the world. Another major limitation of this study is that the interviewed students were chosen by their respective L2 teachers, thereby adding an element of bias. However, when interviewing the students and what is also evident in the results, the students have been candid in their views and have not shown any form of bias for their teaching faculty. Finally, the sample size is relatively small and therefore the results might not mirror the views of a larger L2 student population.

## **Results and Analysis**

To begin with, L2 teachers and students were asked about their general preference regarding feedback strategies in the order of direct vs indirect; narrower vs broader category of errors; error location vs error labeling; error codes vs verbal comments; and textual corrections vs endnotes. Given that the biggest debate regarding feedback strategies is about being direct or indirect when marking errors, the study dug a little deeper to understand whether the preferences for direct and indirect feedback change with the following three factors:

- Type of errors; whether teachers and students prefer direct or indirect feedback depending on the kind of error, such as grammar, punctuation etc.
- Frequency of errors; if a student is making the same error in subsequent drafts, would teachers and students prefer direct or indirect feedback to address this issue
- Timing of errors; based on whether the errors are made at the beginning, during or towards the end of the course, which feedback method would teachers and students prefer

Finally, teachers and students were asked whether they would prefer a mode other than written corrective feedback, such as one-on-one conferencing. The results lead into the inferences drawn followed by implications and some suggestions for academia based on the study's results.

## **Questions**

**Q1. What strategies in general do teachers and students prefer when giving and receiving feedback respectively for academic-level 5 writing?**

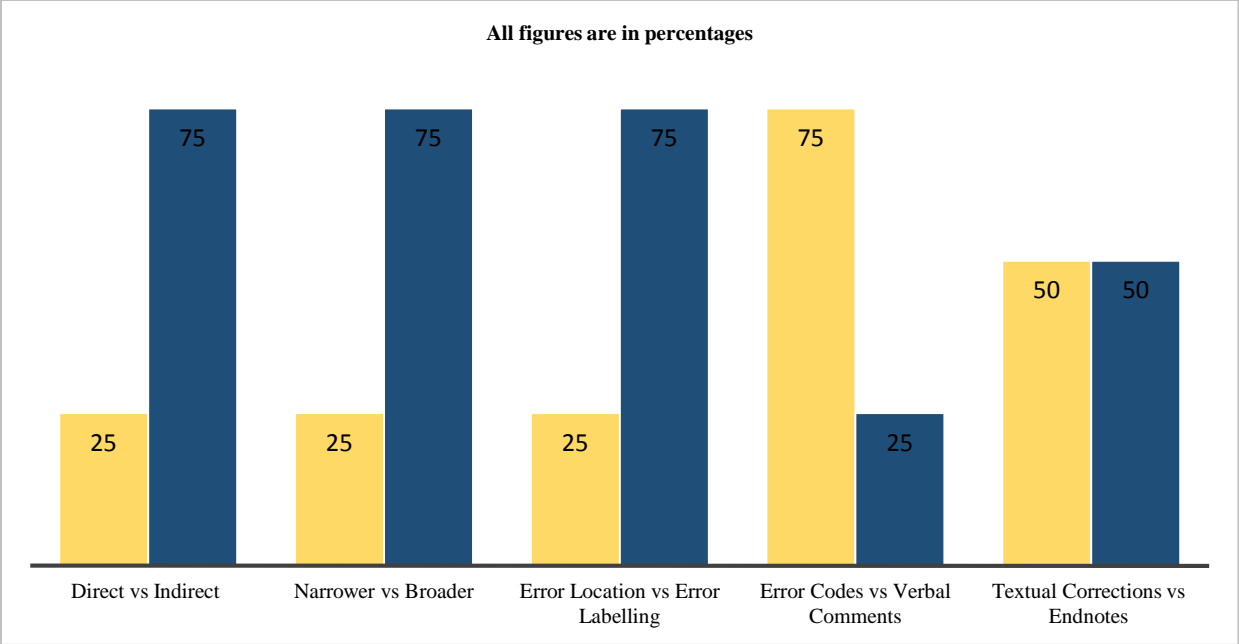


Figure 1: Teachers' Preferences

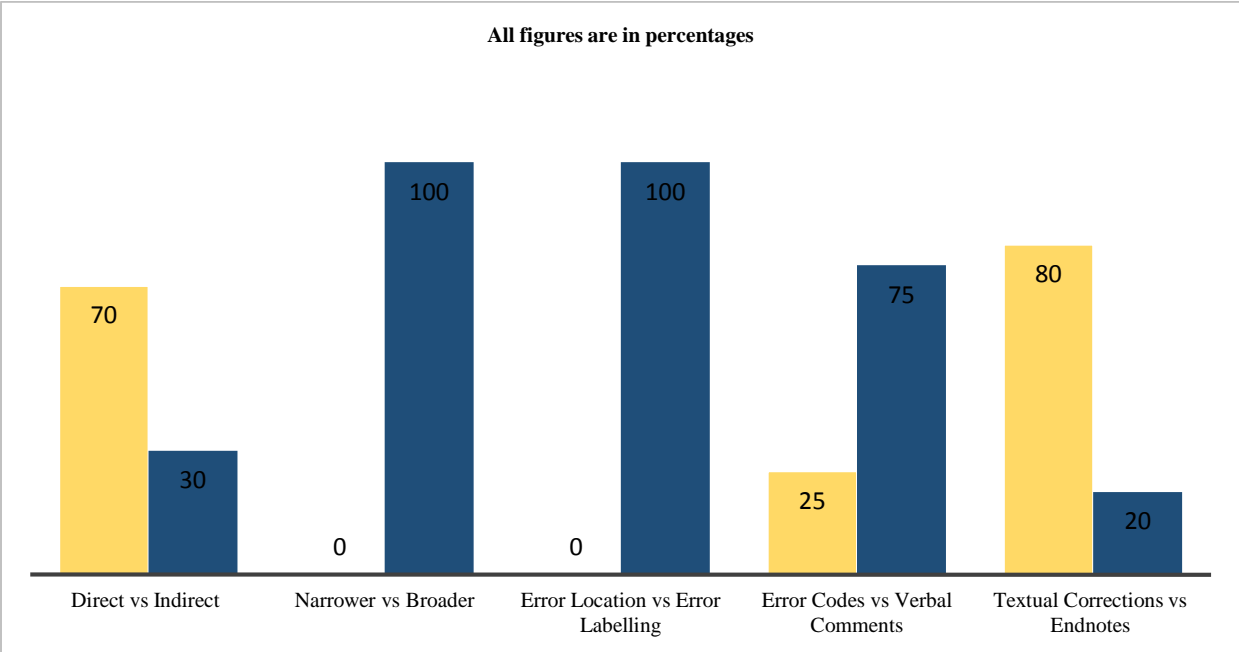


Figure 2

*Direct vs Indirect Feedback*

Most of the teachers preferred to give more indirect feedback by marking the error using a code or some verbal comments. The premise for this was that all the students in academic - level 5 writing have had some basic to intermediate instruction about English grammar and therefore

they should be able to correct the errors if told what kind of error it is. These set of teachers feel that giving the answer by marking directly will impede in the betterment process of students' language development. The few teachers who preferred marking directly – marking the error as well as giving the answer through verbal comments – chose to do this only in certain situations where they felt that students might not be able to correct the error by themselves, such as incorrect word choice. For every other issue, these set of teachers too preferred marking indirectly.

Students, on the other hand, mostly preferred that they receive direct feedback as much as possible. However, an interesting point to note here is that students, more than wanting the correct answer, are looking for help on two aspects: why the particular part of the writing was an error and how to correct the error. They strongly felt that merely marking the type of error was not helpful as they were not sure why they wrote what they wrote was incorrect. These views of the students have also been confirmed in a recent case study of ten L2 writers conducted by Ferris et al. (as cited in Ferris, 2014, p. 26) where one of the reasons for students not correcting all the errors marked by teachers was not knowing “how to correct the problem even when it was called to their attention.”

Previous research done on the usefulness and drawbacks of using direct and indirect feedback have given mixed results. On one hand, it has been argued “that indirect feedback is more helpful to student writers in most cases because it leads to greater cognitive engagement, reflection, and problem-solving.” (Ferris, 2014, p. 32). In recent times, however, several “SLA researchers” have found that direct feedback is better for “students’ update and retention of information about targeted language forms such as articles”. (p. 32) Essentially, there are 3 situations where teachers can use direct feedback “judiciously”: “when students are at beginning levels of English proficiency; when errors are untreatable (such as idiomatic phrases, word choice, and word form where teachers cannot refer to a specific rule for error correction), and when the teacher wishes to focus student attention on particular error patterns but not others”. (p. 95). One of the practical applications of direct feedback is the technique of “reformulation”, where the teacher rewrites the incorrect or awkward sentences to suit the given context. (Ferris, 2014, p. 97) This approach though has not been accepted by the ESL community with a lot of

confidence as there has not been any definitive research to prove its long-term effectiveness in improving students' language proficiency, and it is time consuming for teachers.

To summarize, for “written accuracy”, “clear, narrow, and explicit feedback (direct feedback) might help students to master the structure in question”. For self-editing strategies, “a process of ‘guided learning and problem-solving’ (indirect feedback) may better serve the long-term objective of fostering student autonomy in monitoring their own writing.” (Ferris, 2014, p. 33)

#### *Narrower/Selective Marking vs Broader/Comprehensive Marking*

This was one of the feedback strategies that both the teachers and students agreed on. They preferred to give and receive feedback respectively on all the error categories as opposed to just a few. This is because teachers do not want to convey the wrong message that the student in question has only those errors to work on that were marked in the document. Students as part of other research conducted on this aspect of error correction also support these results; in work done by Leki, Ferris and Roberts, and Rennie (as cited in Ferris, 2014, p. 45), most of the students preferred comprehensive error correction, except for a few who wanted feedback on their “most serious errors”. However, some L2 writing experts think otherwise.

Many experts advise against marking comprehensively as it might “exhaust” teachers and “overwhelm” students. They suggest instead to mark “patterns” of errors so that the students as well as the teacher get to focus on fewer things, and the chances of the students being motivated to correct their errors is higher. However, some other experts feel that when L2 writers go out in the real world, the expectations from them are complete accuracy in their written work. This level of perfection can be reached only if students are made aware of all the areas of language that they need to work on, rather than just a few. (Ferris, 2014, p. 45)

If both the methods of feedback are equally beneficial, then which one should L2 teachers use? Ferris (2014) provides a good argument to settle this conundrum. She suggests that it is important that teachers, before choosing to comprehensively or selectively mark the errors, reflect on the purpose for which the work is being marked. If the intention is to make the students take cognizance of their major errors, or when the students are at a basic level of language development, then a selective approach might be useful. On the contrary, if students are at a higher level of language acquisition and are already aware of their error patterns, then a more

comprehensive method might work as students are nearing the stage of having an error-free document. (p.45)

#### *Error Location vs Error Labelling*

Rather than merely locating the error in a sentence or paragraph, most teachers prefer to locate and label the error according to the type of error made. This is done with a view to give students the precise type of error thereby making the work of students easier. On the same lines, all the students interviewed wanted teachers to label the errors. Some research suggests that students prefer error labelling to just locating the errors, such as the ones done by Ferris, Ferris and Roberts, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, and Rennie (as cited in Ferris, 2014, p. 45). However, a study done by Ferris (2006) suggests that students were able to correct 75% of the errors that were just located and not labelled, and they were able to do this by relying on prior knowledge they had. (Ferris, 2014, p. 45)

#### *Error Codes vs Verbal Comments*

This comparison showed a sharp contrast between what the teachers and the students preferred. While the teachers liked to use error codes as it is concise and saves time, the students found that there are too many codes to refer to, which leads to spending a lot more time in understanding the codes than correcting the errors. Consequently, they prefer short, verbal comments. As corroborated by Ferris, “student writers resent cryptic codes or symbols that they do not understand (e.g., Ferris, 1995b; Straub, 1997).” In fact, some teachers also found it cumbersome to remember the coding system and most importantly use it consistently throughout the document. (Ferris, 2014, p. 103)

#### *Textual Corrections vs Endnotes*

While the teachers had equal reactions to both methods, the students tended to have a clear opinion. Some teachers preferred to make textual corrections – marking errors precisely where the error was made – because it is easier to review the document to assess the types of language problems the students have. The other set of teachers preferred writing summarizing notes at the end of the document when they want to focus more on the ideas and the construction of the writing than its grammatical aspects. Most of the students though preferred to have error marked next to the relevant sentence as endnotes seem vague and unhelpful to them when wanting to know the specific language problems they have to work on.

ESL experts suggest that a combination of textual corrections and comments at the end of the paper “may be very appropriate for advanced writers who are developing independent self-editing skills.” It is also suggested that “if the teacher has implemented a program of tracking or charting student errors across drafts and assignments, a summary form that indicates the major errors marked and perhaps how many of each type there are may be a key component of the program.” (Ferris, 2014, p. 103)

**Q2. Based on the types of language problems, do teachers and students prefer direct feedback or indirect feedback?**

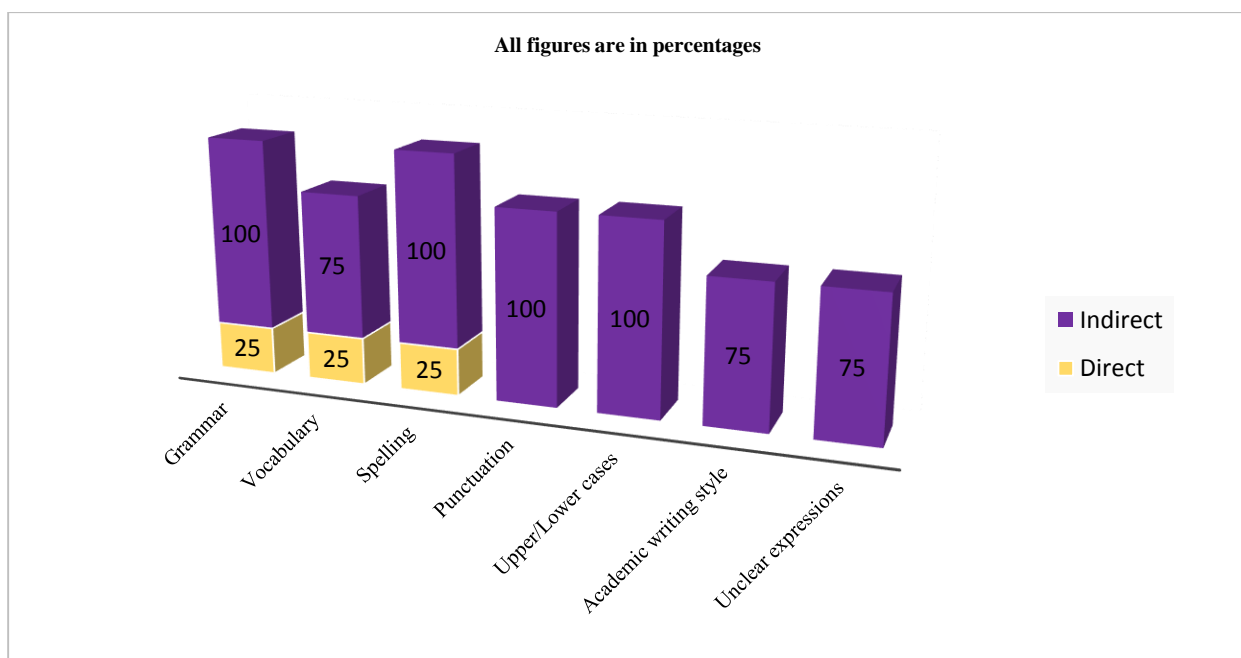


Figure 3: Teachers' Preferences

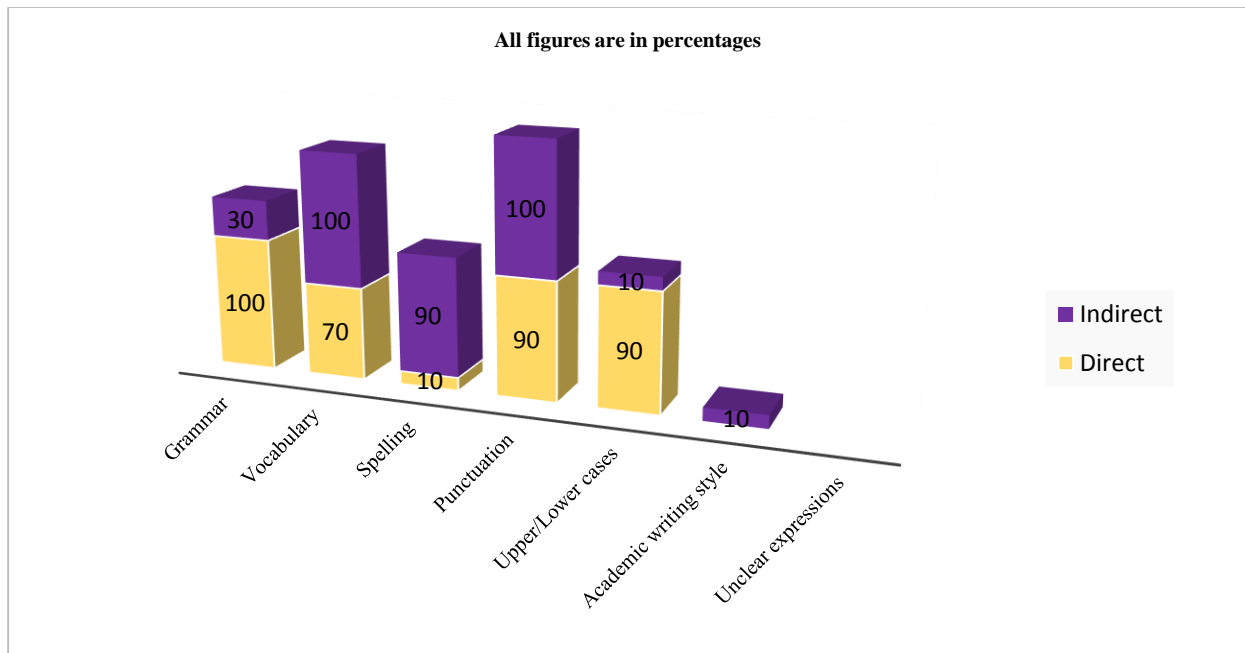


Figure 4: Students' Preferences

While the general instinct of teachers is to give indirect feedback to students for language problems in writing, when broken down by types of errors, they also consider giving direct feedback. For errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and upper/lower cases teachers feel that directly giving the answer will hamper the language development of students. There will be no motivation left from the students' end to try and find out how to correct the error and refer to grammar textbooks. Therefore, it might serve the immediate purpose of correcting the errors in the said document but the students will not learn from their mistakes and carry forward their learning to the next document.

The teachers are willing though to consider direct feedback in cases where the students might not be able to self-edit, such as incorrect word choice, academic writing style, and unclear or awkward phrases. Most students refer to online translation guides that might serve them well for most part of their document but might sometimes misguide them regarding choice of words. In such a situation, teachers prefer to write the exact word that suits the context of the sentence. Similarly, few of the students are aware of the academic writing style expected in a Canadian classroom; it is often completely different from what they are used to in their native countries. Therefore, teachers prefer to be explicit when it comes to giving feedback about this aspect. This



form of direct feedback is usually given by labelling the errors using error codes along with appropriate verbal comments.

The students, interestingly, have a very different view regarding feedback on specific error types. Students would generally prefer direct feedback for all error types. But given a choice, they would accept indirect feedback for problems with spelling, punctuation, and upper/lower cases. When probed further and asked whether giving direct feedback all the time will help them in the long run, the students had an interesting response. They were quite clear that when they said they wanted direct feedback, they were not really looking for the answer to the error, except for instances such as incorrect word choice, academic writing style issues, and awkward expressions where they were in sync with teachers' views. What they were really looking for is how to take the next step after knowing that it's a verb tense error or article error. They were not sure why the verb tense or article that they chose was incorrect, where to look for help with verb tenses or articles, and then how to ultimately correct the error. This perception goes in line with the fact that more than half of the students in this study have not taken any prior grammar courses where they were taught how to correct error and self-edit their work. This gap calls for some interventions from the teaching faculty, which are outlined in the 'Suggestions for Academia' section.

**Q3. Based on the frequency of language problems, do teachers and students prefer direct feedback or indirect feedback?**

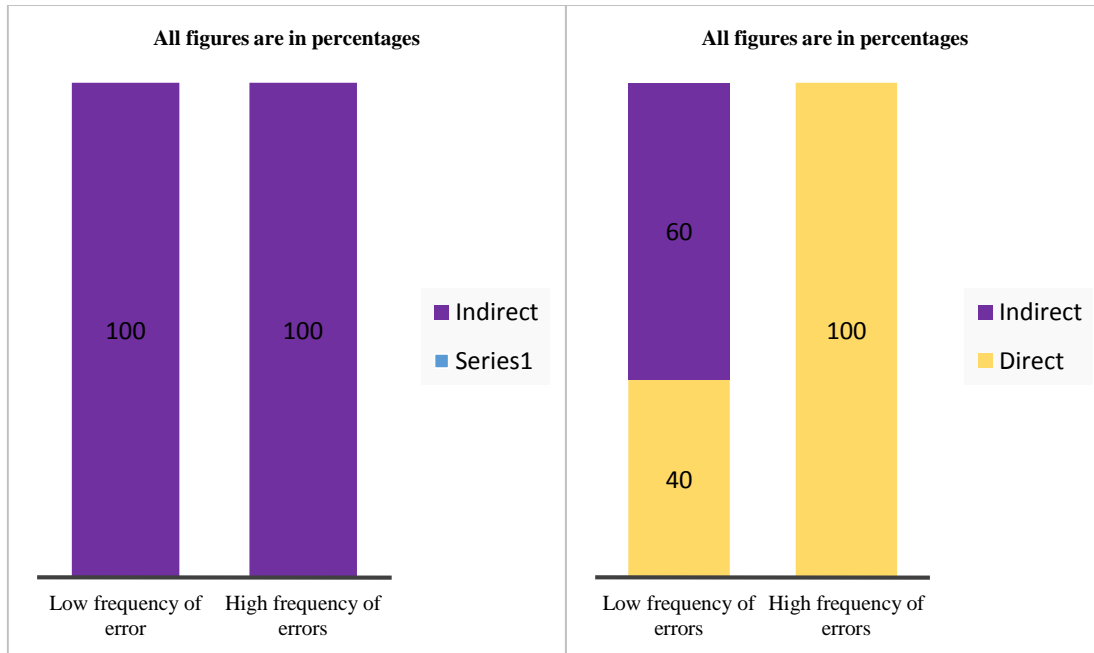


Figure 5: Teachers' Preferences

Figure 6: Students' Preferences

Whether a student is making the same error once or is repeating the error in subsequent drafts, most teachers do not change their method of giving feedback if a student is repeating an error. They feel that the student is repeating the error either because of negligence or lack of motivation, not because of not knowing how to correct the error. As a contrast, if a student is repeating an error in subsequent drafts, students prefer to receive more direct feedback as they have not been able to correct the error themselves. If the frequency of the error is relatively low, students are open to receiving indirect feedback in the areas of spelling, punctuation, and upper/lower cases.

**Q4. Based on the timing of the language problems during a semester, do teachers and students prefer direct feedback or indirect feedback?**

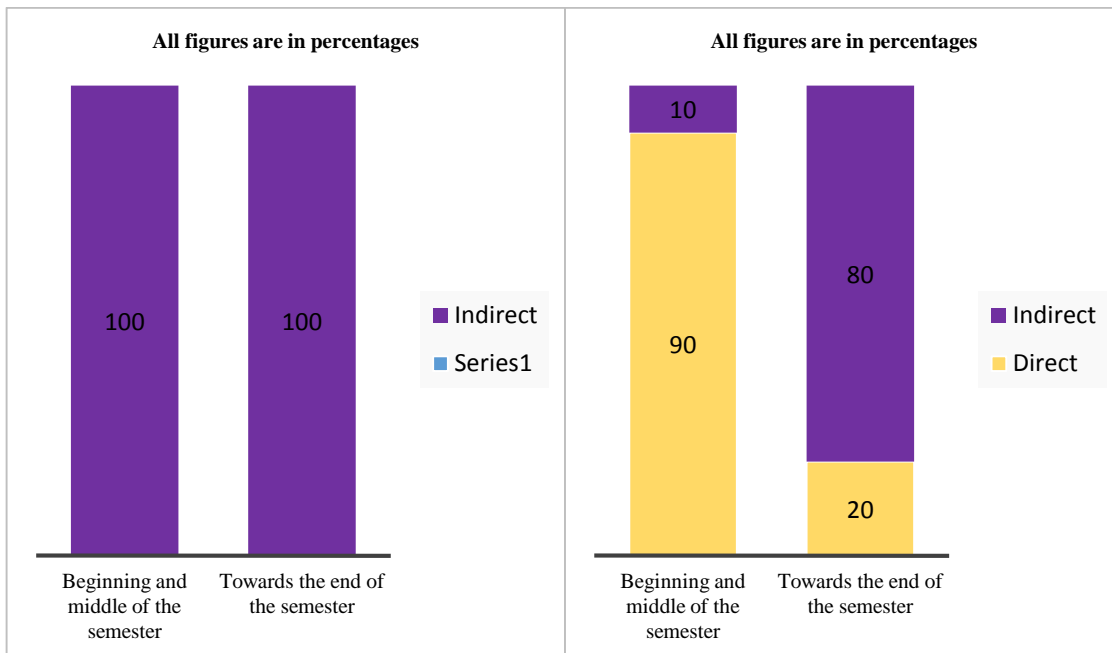


Figure 7: Teachers' Preferences

Figure 8: Students' Preferences

Irrespective of when the errors are made, be it at the beginning of the semester or towards the end, teachers only believe in giving indirect feedback. However, most students feel that during the start of the semester, teachers should give more direct feedback so that students can understand what the reasons for the errors are. Once they are about a month into the semester, they can receive indirect feedback as by then the expectation is that the student knows how to correct the error.

**Q5. Other than written feedback, are other modes of feedback such as one-on-one conferencing used? If so, how useful are they as compared to written feedback?**

Both teachers and students unanimously felt that one-on-one conferencing with the teacher was helpful. Further, they felt that neither written feedback nor conferencing would be as effective separately as they are as a combination. They preferred scheduling a conference with the teacher two to three days after getting written feedback. This way, the students got sufficient time to analyze the marked errors and go to the teacher with any residual clarifications.

### *Other Comments*

In addition to the questions, teachers and students were given an opportunity to voice their other concerns and highlight practices that were working well for them. These comments are as follows:

- Some of the teachers felt that despite them marking comprehensively, students tend to repeat errors in subsequent drafts. Teachers then have to spend substantial amounts of time in correcting the same errors again and again.
- While talking to the students, some of them expressed that they were not sure of the various rules of APA and MLA citation formats.
- Students also felt that when choosing the appropriate word, they were not sure how to interpret the dictionary and thesaurus accurately.
- Some students also had difficulties in understanding the handwriting of teachers.
- While teachers were marking errors, students felt that substantial parts of their writing was being rewritten. The students were confused as to whether they were being marked for errors or for their writing styles.

### **Implications for Academia**

For many years, ESL researchers have been trying to find out the most effective way of giving feedback to students for their writing. Some insist that say written corrective feedback is needed while others claim that giving feedback is hampering the natural thinking process of the student. At this point then, it is imperative to stop and step back to look at the big picture. But if larger picture were to be viewed, Manchon asks a very pertinent question: are ESL students “learning to write” or “writing to learn”? (as cited in Hyland, K., 2013, p. 241) To answer this and the other questions in this study, teaching professionals might need to step back a little and analyze the learning curve of an ESL student.

In almost all high schools around the world where English is taught as a second language, the curriculum is focused on teaching grammar with possible additions of reading short stories and writing descriptive essays. Outside the classroom, students seldom get a chance to apply their learning and feel more comfortable in conversing in their L1. Moving on to undergraduate study in a university where the medium of instruction is English, before they can be admitted into their chosen discipline, they have to prove their English proficiency by either taking a

standardized test such as TOEFL or IELTS, or they might have to take a test conducted by the university such as the English Placement Test conducted by the Canadian university in this study. In the ESL program, they are taught English integrating the four learning skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For most students, this might be the first opportunity to apply their learning in the form of speaking and listening. In writing classes, where the focus is supposed to be on formulation of ideas and structural thinking, invariably teachers have to direct their feedback toward grammar as there are many grammatical mistakes even at this stage. When students then move on to their respective academic courses, academic teachers tend to look more for skills, such as writing reports, cohesively organizing thoughts, making clear arguments and writing logical essays. They are willing to overlook grammatical errors as long as the idea gets conveyed coherently (Hyland, 2013). Finally, when students enter the world of job-seeking, it becomes apparent that employers are not only looking at what academic teachers looked for, but they also expect that ESL students have all-round communication skills with no grammatical errors. (Hu & Hoare [in review])

It is evident from the previous discussion that the focus of ESL instruction and the expectations from ESL students vary considerably as they progress from high school to the workplace. The most significant jump in expectations though in the entire learning curve of an ESL student is from the ESL courses to the academic courses. ESL teachers see ‘writing effectively’ as the ultimate goal, whereas academic teachers see writing only as a tool to effectively communicate subject-related content. This contrast also has a direct impact on whether the goal of error correction is to correct the immediate errors in a document or to build a foundation to enable students to view the narrower picture of grammatical errors to the bigger picture of ideas construction. Consequently, to meet the twin objectives of enabling students in “learning to write” and “writing to learn,” the following section outlines some practical suggestions for ESL pedagogy.

### **Suggestions for Academia**

As Ferris aptly remarks, “It is important for teachers (and students) to perceive error feedback as part of a larger strategy of building students' knowledge and strategy bases, not simply a “fix-it” list for a particular paper.” (Ferris, 2014, p. 108). Therefore, given the gaps that exist in the methodologies that are used by L2 teachers, the expectations of students, and the

expectations of academic teachers and prospective employers, given below are some suggestions for ESL teachers:

1. To prepare teachers for L2 error treatment, it is essential for teachers to be aware of the following:
  - a. Teachers must study those aspects of grammar that are “particularly problematic” for L2 students: forms, meanings, and uses of the different verb tense and aspect combinations; use of active and passive voice; types of verbs; basic type of nouns and article usage; and clause and sentence patterns. After thoroughly studying these aspects, teacher should ask themselves, “Could they clearly, accurately, and concisely define the terms? Could they provide examples of the structure that are useful and unambiguous? Could they identify patterns of these types of errors in actual student writing?”
  - b. Teachers need to have an understanding of the second language acquisition process to be able to understand error patterns made by students.
  - c. As ESL courses are a stepping stone to academic courses, teachers should be familiar with the kind of writing that is expected of students by their respective academic teachers and should plan their lessons accordingly. (Ferris, 2014, p. 62-63)
2. Before deciding which feedback strategy to use, it will help L2 teachers to understand the following factors that might influence choosing one strategy over the other:
  - a. “Students’ English Language Learning Backgrounds”- Making a distinction between the three kinds of L2 students, namely international/visa students, resident immigrants, and children of resident immigrants – is essential. International students’ “exposure to English has been largely formal. Such students tend to have a strong English grammar foundation, have a good grasp of key grammatical terms, and can articulate rules.” However, what is key to note about these students is that it should not be assumed “this knowledge is always transferred accurately to student writing, as English instruction in non-English speaking countries often falls short in providing opportunities for students to apply formal knowledge to their own written production.” (Ferris, 2014, p. 84)

- b. “Influence of Specific L1s”- For instance, “native speakers of Japanese may struggle with using English articles, Chinese speakers may have trouble with the verb tense system, Russian speakers may have difficulty with word order, and Arabic and Spanish speakers may make errors in sentence boundaries”. (Ferris, 2014, p. 85). Having an understanding of these characteristics will assist teachers in tailoring feedback that addresses individual language concerns.
        - c. “Process of Second Language Acquisition”- Depending on which stage of acquisition they are in, vocabulary; morphology; phonology; or syntax, students “will make errors reflective of their SLA processes”. (Ferris, 2014, p. 10)
        - d. “Differences in L2 Proficiency”- To understand this, Brown’s taxonomy of stages of error recognition might be useful. For example, if the student is at the ‘random’ and ‘emergent’ stages, “learners are completely or partially systematic in their uses of particular structures.” For this kind of student, a more direct approach in giving feedback might help. At higher levels of proficiency, such as in the ‘systematic’ and ‘stabilization’ stages, students are able to correct error either by themselves or when told by the teacher. In such a case then, indirect feedback might work. (Ferris, 2014, p. 86)
        - e. “Global vs Local errors”- Some types of errors, called global errors, can interfere with the understanding of the context of a sentence or an essay. Other types of errors, such as lexical errors, are able to still convey the meaning of the sentence or the essay. Marking globally versus locally has a direct impact on whether L2 writing teachers would like to focus their attention more on students’ grammatical proficiency or on their ability to develop ideas and arguments. (Ferris, 2014, p. 88)
        - f. Type, frequency, and timing of errors- As is evident from the results of this study, students prefer to receive direct feedback for areas such as grammar, when errors are repeated, and during the start of the semester. Teachers who generally give indirect feedback might benefit from this perspective of students.
3. To be uniform in correction methodologies and to encourage standardization, the ESL department could discuss the standards of correcting a student’s paper: the parameters for

correction, the parameters where teachers are allowed to be subjective, whether to mark comprehensively or selectively, and the implications of each method.

4. Prior to beginning the curriculum of the ESL course, the teacher can conduct a diagnostic test in the form of a descriptive paragraph. This will give an idea to the teacher about the students' level of proficiency in both grammar as well as organization of ideas. With this information in mind, the teacher can then fine tune feedback accordingly.
5. After teachers correct the first paper of the students, three types of activities could be conducted as a follow-up:
  - a. Teacher can make a class error profile list, which lists the percentage of errors for a student in each category of error. (Ferris, 2014, p. 89) Once the teacher gets an idea of which kind of errors are common for the class, the teacher can either have a special class to address them or direct students to the writing centre where the writing center can take a session on that topic. This way the pressure is off the teacher and the students also get a chance to clarify questions as a group. An important point to note here is that when teachers ask students to go to the writing center, the writing center staff should be advised beforehand that the focus of the session should be on the grammatical topic and not on grammatical accuracy of the specific paper.
  - b. In addition to the teacher having a summary of the errors for each student, the students themselves could be asked to maintain an error log of the errors made in each section based on the type of errors marked. Especially relevant for instances where teachers mark errors comprehensively, these error logs can help students track their "error patterns" and subsequently focus on the most pressing errors. (Ferris, 2014, p. 41)
  - c. For the first piece of work that is corrected, the teacher can have a session in class where students bring their marked paper and correct the errors in class. If the teacher finds that a number of students are coming to him/her with a common issue, it can be addressed towards the end of the class. This is a useful practice to follow that not only provides clarification to students on how to correct their errors after receiving feedback, but this will also reduce the frequency of errors in the following drafts.



6. Students might benefit if explained the five stages of error correction: locating the error; identifying the type of error; understanding why it is an error; knowing where and how to look for the correct answer; and finally correcting the error in the given context (refer to appendix)
7. An important learning intervention in most writing classes is mini-lessons on grammar. Firstly, the following “subskills” are required to prepare such a lesson:
  - a. Identifying problematic aspects of grammar. To obtain this data, error charts prepared at the end of the first paper will help.
  - b. Using grammar resources that explain the concept(s) in a simple manner and give relevant examples.
  - c. Preparing practice material where students can apply what they’ve learnt in a mini-lesson. (Ferris, 2014, p. 65-66)
8. For more clarification on the various citation formats, as some students in this study had expressed difficulty in understanding, the Writing Centre could be requested to conduct a two-hour workshop.
9. For students who have not taken any writing or grammar courses prior to taking academic- level 5, it might help to give them names of some simple grammar books that they could refer to for correcting their language problems.
10. At the beginning of the semester, it might help to teach students how to effectively use a dictionary and thesaurus.
11. If correction is done using error codes, teachers can have one class dedicated to understanding the error codes, examples of errors that fall under those error codes, and how to correct the error using the code.
12. Apart from written feedback methodologies, teachers can also use methods such as peer editing. (Ferris, 2014, p. 147) This is especially helpful in the beginning where students are likely to make more errors and they get a chance to understand what it is like to proof-read a paper.
13. To move students towards academic language development, teachers can adopt the following practices:
  - a. Selecting text for reading material- some of the points to consider here are the difficulty level of vocabulary used, the syntactic structures, and the readability.

Too many complex structures in the reading will make students lose interest. Given that students will be advancing to their respective academic disciplines after completing the ESL course, it would help to make the reading relevant to some of the academic disciplines that students have planned to take. (Ferris, 2014, pp. 162-165)

- b. Balancing intensive and extensive reading- While reading exercises in class, also called intensive reading, is an important component of ESL writing, reading outside class or extensive reading is as important. Research also suggests that “strong, avid readers are much more likely to be successful writers than are those who do not read much or well.” (Ferris, 2014, p. 167)
- c. Selecting vocabulary- referring to the academic word list is a good starting point to identify words that might be useful for students in their academic disciplines. What is even more important than learning vocabulary is how to use these words in a sentence and in a given context. Developing practice exercises for students to apply their vocabulary knowledge will hold them in good stead for their language development. (Ferris, 2014, pp. 170-173)
- d. Lastly, preparing a well-rounded feedback environment for students requires immense effort from the teachers which might ultimately lead to teacher burnout. (Ferris, 2014, p. 110) While seeking assistance from the writing centre is one of the ways to get the pressure off teachers, making students gradually move towards self-editing will considerably ease the efforts of teachers in the long run. By making students identify their persistent error patterns obtained from their error logs, students can keep track of their progress and will also be motivated to move towards producing error-free documents.

### **Further Research**

An important aspect that required further study is whether the suggestions offered by the interviewed students as well as in this paper are effective in an actual classroom scenario.

### **References**

Ferris, D. R. (2014). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Writing*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

- Ferris, D.R, Liu, H., & Rabie, B. (2011). "The job of teaching writing": Teacher views of responding to student writing. *Writing and Pedagogy*, 3, 39-77.
- Hu, J. & Hoare, A. (in review). Language problems in ESL writing: Voices of employers. *The International Journal of Leadership in Learning*.
- Hyland, K. (2013). Faculty feedback: Perceptions and practices in L2 disciplinary writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 22. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2013.03.003>
- Jamie, K (2008, Jan 2). What exactly is a 'morphological error [Web log comment]. Retrieved from <http://www.english-test.net/forum/ftopic21590.html>
- Lee, I. (2005). Error correction in the L2 writing classroom: What do students think? *TESL Canada Journal*, 22(2), 1-16.
- Lee, I. (2008). Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17(3), 144-164.
- Lee, I. (2009). Ten mismatches between teachers' beliefs and written feedback practice. *ELT Journal*, 63(1), 13-22.
- Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annuals*, 24, 203-218.
- Shoebottom, P. (1996-2015). *Syntax - English sentence structure*. Retrieved from <http://esl.fis.edu/learners/advice/syntax.htm>
- Thompson Rivers University (n.d.). Academic English-as-a-Second or Additional Language (ESAL) Courses. Retrieved from [http://www.tru.ca/hse/esl/academic\\_esal/courses.html](http://www.tru.ca/hse/esl/academic_esal/courses.html)

## Appendix

By Meena Balachandran

meenayogini@gmail.com

# Five Stages of Error Correction

