

WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN GHANA

Dorah Mensah¹, Charles Owu-Ewie², Levina Nyameye Abunya³,
Albert Abban⁴

¹Department of Languages, Akrokerri College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana.

²College of Languages Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

³Department of Language and Communication Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

⁴Department of English, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
E-mail: albertabban03@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines the practice of written error correction from different perspectives in real classroom contexts. Although a plethora of research has been done in different contexts, the subject is least exploited in Ghana, especially in senior High school contexts. This paper reports on a qualitative study of written corrective feedback practices in three Senior High schools in Ghana. Drawing on Schmidt's noticing hypothesis and Swain's comprehensive output hypothesis models, the study aims to determine whether teachers' written error corrections effectively direct students towards 'noticing' the gaps in their written 'output', thereby resulting in higher degrees of learnability. A sample size of 824 students was selected from five common course areas using a systematic random sampling strategy, while a purposive sampling strategy was used to select nine English language teachers who had at least three years of continuous experience from the three schools. The findings of the study indicate that teachers have positive beliefs about the potency of written error corrections in the development of language. However, variances in the choice of strategies, practices of teachers, and preferences of students result in the provision of non-targeted feedback which affects revision and learnability. This study recommends that teachers should collaborate with learners to provide more targeted corrections which would result in enhanced 'noticing' and improved learnability of the English language among Ghanaian students.

Keywords: *approaches; feedback; positive; strategies; written error corrections*

1. Introduction

The role error correction plays in language learning, particularly in non-native contexts, has been extensively debated in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Corder, 1982; Ferris, 2007). Most of the earlier contentions in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) focused on the place of errors in language learning, and whether or not errors should be corrected. While most earlier linguists agreed on errors as useful for

language learning (Corder, 1982; Ferris, 2007), there were different opinions on how errors could be used to aid language learning. Scholars such as (Chomsky, 1959; Krashen, 1985; Truscott, 1996b; 2007) argued against error correction, claiming they provide harmful effects on language learning. This opposition was re-echoed by several other researchers who indicated that corrective feedback was time-consuming for teachers, and that learners did not use it effectively in learning (Ferris, 1997). These linguists rather proposed positive reinforcement and positive evidence as useful for second language development (Chomsky, 1959, 1985). Rather than spending time to provide explicit written feedback, teachers and instructors should rather push students in their output to facilitate their interlanguage development (Allwright, 2006). These oppositions notwithstanding, other linguists have argued in favor of error correction as capable of increasing learner competencies to improve failing performances of learners of the English language (Bitchener, 2008).

Teaching writing in a second language classroom is an activity that requires active participation of both teachers and learners. One way by which teachers can help learners improve upon their writing is the provision of meaningful feedback. Hence, providing feedback has been seen as an essential component of the teaching and learning process, especially in the ESL classroom (Mashaan, 2020). Kepner (1991) defines feedback generally as any procedure that is used to inform a learner about the rightness or wrongness of a response to an instruction. Ellis (2009) confirms that feedback could be positive or negative. Positive feedback affirms that a learner's response to an activity is correct, and signals the veracity of the content of a learner's utterance or the linguistic correctness of the utterance. The significance of this type of feedback is that it provides affective support to the learner and fosters motivation to continue learning. The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; 1995) highlights the benefits of corrective feedback in drawing learners' attention to form.

Corrective feedback practices vary and are broadly classified into written and oral forms, with written feedback further divided into direct, indirect, focused, unfocused, metalinguistic, electronic, peer, and reformulation (Ellis, 2009). Controversies persist regarding the efficacy and implementation of corrective feedback, such as its contribution to L2 acquisition and the optimal timing for feedback (Ellis, 2009). Despite these controversies, researchers agree that corrective feedback is essential for facilitating L2 knowledge, as mistakes are expected at all stages of learning (Lee, 2019). Feedback in writing covers composition skills, style, organization, content, and more, and is crucial for improvement (Myles, 2002). Teachers must help learners develop self-correction strategies, as the absence of feedback can disadvantage students in both writing and speaking (Myles, 2002).

In Ghanaian classrooms, error correction practices are inconsistent, with many scripts unmarked, leaving learners unaware of their errors (Mensah, 2021). Some learners struggle with revision due to unclear feedback, and others fail to revise altogether. Despite the expanse of research carried out in this field (Ducken, 2014; Irwin, 2017; Mollestad & Hu, 2016; Owusu, 2019; 2020; Rastgou, 2022; Zhang & Chang, 2021), there still exists a great deal of inconsistencies in the findings of most studies, especially with the types of WCF practiced in classroom contexts. Ferris (2010) advocates that more research should be carried out in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) to provide conclusive findings on the effectiveness of error correction strategies in different contexts. Also, Yunus (2020) suggests that future research should focus on broader contexts with data from classroom observations and interviews for in-depth and more conclusive findings. Additionally, Owusu (2019) opines that the concept of error correction strategies and their usefulness is yet to fully receive the needed attention in Ghanaian educational contexts. Adjei (2019)

recommends investigating how L2 writing errors are corrected by teachers and learners. This paper, therefore, examines the beliefs of teachers regarding the provision of written corrective feedback in the English language classroom as well as ways in which the practice of written corrective feedback is carried out in selected Senior High Schools in Ghana. This paper selects public senior high schools in the Ashanti region of Ghana as the defining boundary because it is the region with the highest number of Senior High schools (146) in Ghana. The study is relevant since it provides a better description of the realities in terms of written corrective feedback practices of English language teachers and students.

2. Literature Review

A considerable number of studies have been conducted on WCF practices. Ducken (2014) investigates how written corrective feedback is practiced in the L2 classroom by exploring its impact on students' grammatical proficiency. Through the experimental approach, the study's findings agree with Merrill (1985) that treatment of errors in the form of both explicit or implicit feedback helps learners to learn better. The study revealed that WCF practices have positive effects on secondary and tertiary learners' writing classrooms. However, the study by Merrill maintained that minimal or a reduction in the correction of learner errors was advisable for advanced proficiency in the L2 classroom. This, according to Swain (1985), would reduce the cognitive load on learners.

In a study on second-year Japanese university students, Irwin (2017) investigated the interaction between the preferences of students on feedback and actual teacher practices in the EFL classroom. Employing a quantitative case study approach, data was gathered through surveys, protocol questionnaires, and interviews to ascertain the types of corrective feedback provided by teachers. The study revealed that feedback provided by the teachers, remained largely teacher-centred, making students passive in the learning process. He called for clear diversification of teacher feedback practices. The study, though useful, presents a weakness of inadequate sample size, contextual non-representation as well as lack of control groups to ascertain the impact of the intervention.

Additionally, Mollestam and Hu (2016) investigated the experiences and attitudes of compulsory school teachers regarding their corrective feedback practices. The study also looked into the advantages and disadvantages of corrective feedback on learners in grades 3-5 (aged 9-11) in Lund, Sweden. The qualitative approach was used with a focus on semi-structured interviews as tools for data collection. The study's findings confirmed previous studies by Zhang and Cheng (2021) and Rastgou (2022) that WCF is effective for enhancing language proficiency by all learners. However, Mollestam and Hu (2016) advocate that WCF should be adapted to suit the purpose, individual situations, and needs. The studies' findings also agree with Truscott (1996) and Kepner (1991) that excess or wrongful application of corrective feedback practices may have potential danger on the learning process. This is so especially when a lot of errors are focused on at one point in time, even though it cannot be left out completely. The study's findings also revealed that oral corrective feedback was good for lower-grade learners since it softens the critique, and considers and observes learner reactions. Direct corrective feedback was mostly preferred since it addressed learner needs by pointing to the error explicitly for learner correction. The small sample size (five teachers) without considering students remained a limitation of the study.

Ganapathy (2020) investigated the types of written corrective feedback provided to ESL Malaysian secondary school students as well as their perceptions about the forms of feedback teachers provided. The quantitative approach was used with a survey

questionnaire as tools for data collection. Participants for the study included 720 form four students drawn from the ESL classroom. Results showed that most learners preferred and benefited from direct feedback on forms such as grammar, paragraph organization, content and clarity of ideas since it made them understand the errors they made clearly. However, it turned out that most students had difficulty identifying and self-regulating their own errors, mostly becoming passive and teacher-dependent. The use of survey questionnaires as the only means of capturing perceptions, constituted a limitation since it excluded other possible modes which could have increased reliability of data.

Again, Bergh and Douwe (2012) carried out a study on the beliefs and perceived problems of Elementary school teachers in the Netherlands. The study investigated the knowledge of teachers about feedback in the context of their beliefs. An experimental research design was adopted for the study. A total of 28 participants were used for the study; 20 females against 8 males. Data was collected through observation and recorded interviews. Analysis was done quantitatively using SPSS software. The study revealed that feedback had a positive impact on students. The findings emphasize that metalinguistic feedback provided awareness of learner errors, stimulated and challenged student learning. They, however, called for form-focused, clear, goal-directed, and adaptive feedback. It is recommended that research that investigates both teachers' and students' perceptions can be done to create a balance in research.

Finally, Owusu (2019) looked into the impact of corrective feedback on the written texts of Business Communication students in Ghana. His study used a sequential exploratory, mixed-method research design. The field data (students' texts and questionnaire items) were collected from Ho, Koforidua, Kumasi, and Sunyani Technical Universities. Using a total of 1280 students, the researcher divided the participants into three groups – Direct Feedback (DF), Indirect Feedback (IF), and No Feedback (NF) groups. The result of the study confirmed earlier studies such as Bitchener (2008) that CF in general has a positive impact on student texts. Additionally, the study revealed that Direct Feedback and Indirect feedback interventions on memorandum and business letters provided better results than No feedback. A similar study can be replicated at other educational levels and contexts to ascertain the effects of Direct Feedback and Indirect Feedback on other linguistic items.

3. Research Method

3.1 Data Sets and Procedure of Analysis

The study adopted the qualitative research design with a focus on case study. The study had a total population of 2713 students, representing schools from category A=1126, category B=915 and category C=672. The total number of 824 students, representing A=295, B= 278, and C = 251 was arrived at as sample size through the sample size determiner proposed by Yamane (1967): $[(n=N/1+N(e)^2)]$. Again, systematic random sampling strategy was used to select a total of 824 students from the five common core areas (General science, General Arts and Business, Home Economics and Visual Arts) to constitute actual sample for the study. This was done by selecting the first, sixth, eleventh, sixteenth, twenty-first, etc student from each of the five classes in each school as means of ensuring equitable selection of sample, and to ensure balanced representation of members in respective course areas. Teacher participants were selected purposively based on the fact that they were English language teachers who had acquired a minimum of three years' continuous teaching service, and who taught second year students at the time of the research.

We employed semi-structured interviews (audio recorded and transcribed) with teachers on the perspectives and practice of written error correction in selected schools, open-ended questionnaires (students), and feedback analysis (FA) of students' exercise books as means of gathering data for the study. The use of multiple data types provided opportunity for data to be compared for validation of results, as well as generate both etic and emic perspectives necessary to ensure validity, though it can be logistically challenging (Duff, 2012). Triangulation of data in which multiple research methods and multiple sources of data are used in a single investigation was recommended as it helped in ensuring reliability and validity of research (Gass et al., 2005). Three teachers who taught English language in second year classes were selected from each of the three schools to serve as participants in the study. The rationale for using this approach was to ensure intense engagement with the participants; enable respondents to freely express their beliefs and opinions on the practice of WCF in real classroom contexts. The approach, therefore, supports Kutnick and Jules (1993)'s view that a good interview is one in which the interviewer takes control over the interview to solicit in-depth information on the perceptions of people, especially teachers, about learning, usage and general standards of English. Ethical procedures at each school were followed including obtaining informed consent, the right to withdraw, and anonymity.

Interview sessions were recorded and identity tags affixed to each recording. Specific recorded files were saved with distinct filenames for easy identification. The recordings were duplicated and given to two research assistants, in addition to the researchers, for independent transcription. Initially, the transcripts were read in their entirety to understand the content and context without imposing any specific analytical lens. In the second stage of transcript analysis, the researchers and the research team read and coded each text independently to determine descriptive categories and criteria for analysis. Individual coding was then compared to ensure consistency. A-priori categories that emerged from the research questions, as well as other themes that emerged outside these categories, were noted and analyzed. The aim of this analysis stage was to become more familiar with the content by mapping out and reviewing the data for further analysis. The criteria and descriptors were reviewed for content analysis. Emerging themes were defined, patterns were identified and grouped under various sub-themes based on the research objectives. These themes provided a comprehensive picture of the collective experiences of written error correction in selected schools. The themes were categorized and assigned specific codes of interest to form the basis for the analysis. The research literature was then consulted to further inform and authenticate the selected categories and criteria. Thus, criteria for content analysis were created through a combination of codes of interest, research literature, and field notes gathered.

Feedback Analysis sessions were conducted outside classrooms using an established classroom observation protocol (Jacobsen et al., 2018). We requested for marked scripts and exercises of student participants in the study. The reason for conducting this kind of analysis was to enable us collect first-hand information on how the practice of WCF was carried out by teachers and students in their professional practice. This was to enable the researchers to triangulate data gathered from interviews in order to ascertain the actual written error correction practices of both teachers and students in participating schools. Feedback points that represented errors teachers had corrected in the classroom were noted and recorded. Also, instances of student responses were identified and recorded. These were analysed and

described based on structured themes for analysis. Findings from Feedback analysis was used to triangulate findings from other sources in order to fully substantiate such findings.

Open-ended questions were considered appropriate for this study. A total of ten (10) open-ended questionnaire items were administered to participating students. This was done to enable the researchers gather detailed information from participants concerning their perspectives and responses to written error corrections they received from their English language teachers. These open-ended questions were subjected to qualitative data analysis, specifically, thematic content analysis by manually coding participant responses into various response categories for analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that a thematic approach may require that researchers move back and forth between stages and not in a linear way.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis and presentation of the study's findings. It discusses beliefs teachers have about the practice of written corrective feedback, ways in which written error correction practices were carried out in real classroom contexts, and preferences of students.

4.1 Beliefs of Teachers Concerning Written Error Correction

In this study, two main questions were used to investigate the beliefs and actual error correction practices of teachers.

1. What are the beliefs teachers have about written corrective feedback?
2. How is the practice of written corrective feedback carried out in selected schools?

In the discussion of the beliefs of teachers regarding written error correction in second language classrooms, three main themes were which provided insights into teachers' beliefs concerning the usefulness, timing and frequency of providing written error correction were drawn:

- a. Teachers' beliefs about the usefulness of written error correction in language learning.
- b. Teachers' beliefs about the appropriate timing of providing written error correction
- c. Teachers' beliefs about the frequency of providing written error correction.

4.1.1 Teachers' Beliefs about the Usefulness of Written Error Correction in Language Learning

The study discovered that all nine teachers expressed positive beliefs that providing feedback on students' writing errors was a useful practice for successful language learning. This is because, according to them, it enabled language learners to deal with their linguistic deficiencies, and hence improve upon their language abilities. One of the teachers reported her personal experience with written error correction when she was in school. According to her, written error correction provided her very useful understanding into the nature of errors she committed, and how she could get over them. To her, the English language teacher's consistent provision of written corrections offered her greater opportunities for effective language learning. She said: *Yes, back in school, my English teacher's practice made me see how useful it is in the learning process because it really helped me. She was very consistent with her correction.* Other teachers also described their beliefs about the usefulness of written error correction in several ways. For example, a teacher said, *personally, I think correction of written items is necessary to help perfect the language of students.* Another teacher also remarked, *it helps the learner feel part of the teaching and*

learning process. An additional advantage of written error correction is its ability to enable students work independently by reviewing their own work even when teachers are not around, thereby making them independent learners. A teacher said this about the phenomenon, *Yes, I think it is important since it gives the students the chance to review their work when you the teacher are not there*.

To most of these teachers, written error corrections played dual roles both to the teachers and their students. While written error corrections help students to see their errors and so work on them, it provides useful information to the teachers regarding their teaching as well as their practice of written error correction. Teachers' reports revealed major benefits they derive from the corrections they provide to their students. A teacher indicated that *written corrections give them opportunity as teachers to assess the amount of learning their students attain, and also help them to measure the effectiveness of their teaching methods and strategies*. Another teacher who was interviewed said, *I use different methods in my teaching so the responses students give on my written corrections enable me to assess how effective my teaching strategies are*. This information, according to the teachers play vital roles in the success of their practice as teachers. A teacher who talked about the usefulness of written error correction said: *I get to see the level of my students' performance on the things I teach*. Just as Ataman and Mirici (2017) noted in their study, another teacher indicated that *written error corrections inform me of my students' progress in learning the language*. This was confirmed by a female teacher who indicated that written error corrections make her see how much of what she taught was actually learnt by her students. She said, *marking my students' exercises makes me see how my students are learning the things I teach them*.

The ensuing discussion portrays that teachers in the participating schools have positive beliefs about the usefulness of written error correction in the process of language learning. These findings align with the study conducted by Chen (2022) which found out that teachers' beliefs, especially when influenced by their different experiences and students' needs determined their practice to a greater extent.

4.1.2 Teachers' Beliefs about the Timing of Providing Written Error Corrections

The responses teachers gave regarding appropriate 'timing' of providing written error corrections were diverse. It was reported by a section of the teachers that timing played significant roles in the provision of written error correction. Some teachers expressed their beliefs that giving feedback on students' learning was important, but much more important, was the timing of the provision. One teacher remarked *I believe in the potential of timely feedback on language development, so I usually stay behind after school hours to mark the exercises of my students and give them back for corrections*. To most of the teachers, error corrections had to be provided timely in order to enable students respond to them appropriately. For instance, a form two teacher said: *I don't believe in delayed feedback or correction. I think it is better to do the corrections earlier so the learners do not forget the corrections*. This was re-echoed by another teacher when he said *I think it is better done early*. One other teacher added that delaying the provision of written feedback makes it lose its significance: He said, *I try. Of late, I have started. I think that delaying correction makes it lose its relevance*. However, some of the teachers expressed indifference regarding the timeliness or otherwise of provision of error corrections. One teacher expressed his view in this way, *I think that written corrections should be provided, but about the timing, I'm not sure how important it is*. Another teacher commented on the relative nature of 'timing'. To

him, a teacher is able to provide written feedback depending on how other factors come to play. He said, *as for the timing, I think it is relative and also depends on the other things you have to do.*

The responses above point to a clear expression of belief on the importance of written error correction by teachers. However, variations exist with regards to how timely or otherwise it should be provided. Some of the teachers thought that it was essentially productive when provided in good time (timely), whereas other teachers thought 'timeliness' does not matter so long as it is provided.

These convictions notwithstanding, the teachers complained about how challenging it is for them to provide timely feedback on the students' writing. In response to the question that sought to investigate how readily they were able to provide timely written feedback to their students, almost all the teachers responded in the negative. The teachers admitted that they were always challenged in their quest to provide timely feedback. In the account of one of the teachers, *it takes about two weeks for me to finish marking my students' essays.* Another teacher revealed that some factors such as nature of the exercises given determine whether or not teachers can provide written feedback. He said, *I try to mark my students' exercises after every lesson, especially exercises that focus on form; however, for exercises that focus on content such as essays, it is usually difficult to provide written corrections in time.* He added that teaching time (single or double period) also determines the possibility of providing written corrections: *during double periods, I do it as soon as I finish teaching, that is, after the exercises are given, I try to provide WCF. If I teach within a single period, then I may have to wait for some time before. Sometimes, it goes beyond a week based on the availability of time.*

It was obvious that some of the teachers felt the need to use contact/teaching time to teach content rather than provide written corrections, since according to them, teaching of content mattered most as one teacher indicated, *I think that it is the teaching which is important; If I use all the time to correct errors and fail to teach them what they should know, what good will it be to them?* These responses indicate the challenging nature of providing 'timely' feedback even though most teachers had stronger beliefs in it.

Feedback Analysis of students' exercise books confirmed delays in the provision of written corrections. The researchers recorded general delays in teacher responses provided on students' written exercises. Examination of student exercises revealed that some exercises which had been given and attended to by students had not received written error corrections even though their dates were older ones. It was registered that some of the written exercises had older dates (days, weeks or even months) after the exercises had been written by the students, relative to the time of this research. Most of these exercises that fell within this category were essay-type exercises. The figure below represents an example of delayed written error correction in one of the schools.

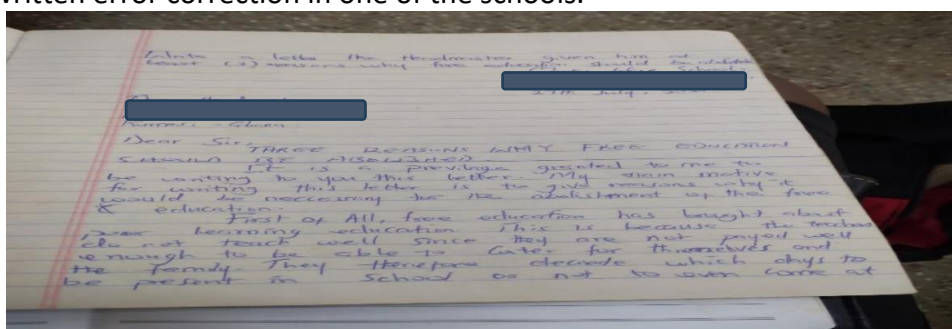


Fig.1 Sample Classroom Exercise

However, most of the students expressed preferences for immediate/timely written corrections to delayed corrections. These hopes were not usually met since most of their teachers found it almost impossible to do so. Indeed, most of the students hoped that their teachers would give written corrections on their work early enough so they could revise and learn from their challenges. A student indicated that the teacher's delay in giving feedback makes her unable to achieve effective learning, since she forgets entirely about the errors, a situation that affects her learning. She said, *the time the teacher finishes marking the exercises, I have even forgotten about the exercise.*

These findings reveal that delays in the provision of written corrections had negative impact on student learning, especially when the delays are prolonged into weeks or even months after exercises are done. Indeed, most of the students expressed their preferences for feedback to be given right after exercises are written, so they can assess their own learning of content taught. Generally, most of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the delays in their teachers' written corrections. For example, one student responded that she finds it difficult revising her teacher's written corrections especially, when the teacher delays in providing the corrections. She said, *I am sometimes unable to connect the error to the topic we learnt because sometimes it is too long after I do the work.*

4.1.3 Teachers' Beliefs about Frequency of Providing Written Error Corrections

We sought to investigate beliefs teachers had regarding the frequency/regularity of written error correction provision. The interview data revealed that virtually all teachers in this study expressed some degree of pessimism about the possibility of providing frequent written error corrections to their students even though they believed it was useful. For example, one of the teachers honestly indicated that he could not provide written corrections frequently even though he knew it was useful, *yes, I do provide error corrections but not as regular as I know I should.* Among the reasons teachers gave for not being able to provide frequent written error corrections to their students were the stressful nature of the English language teachers' work resulting from the numerous aspects of the English language, coupled with limited number of English language teachers present in most schools. Thus, teachers reported about the competing nature of the activities in the face of limited time available, as well as the stressful conditions under which they worked as English language teachers. A teacher remarked that *it will not be possible to mark if I give exercises after every teaching session. This is because marking exercises frequently means I will have to sacrifice other lessons which I don't think is right.* Another teacher also reported that *after taking time to teach and give exercises, I always have to move on to teach other classes.* It was noted that teachers in this study considered the practice of written error corrections additional duty which only added to the already existing high workload of the teacher. Therefore, most teachers appeared to prioritize classroom teaching of content over the frequent practice of written corrections, since the teachers believed that written error corrections only complemented actual classroom teaching of content.

To this end, the teachers expressed major preoccupations with completing the curriculum content rather than indulge in frequent written error correction practices, which according to them only amounted to 'waste' of teaching time. It was certain from the interviews that most of the teachers in this study exercised fears of not being able to complete the content of the curriculum, which they thought could result in mass failures of students in English language, a situation every teacher would obviously avoid. One of the teachers said, *I think that it is the teaching which is important; If I use all the time to correct*

errors and fail to teach them what they should know, what good will it be to them? In another teacher's opinion, *sure, at the end of the day, it is the teacher's ability to complete the 'content' in the curriculum that matters.* In some situations, some teachers had to be persuaded to provide written error corrections to their students. The comments made by one Head of Department (HOD) in one of the senior high schools in this study give credence to this:

It is always proper to let your learners practice what you teach them, especially in an essay form. As HOD, I advise my colleagues to give at least two essays every semester.

The discussion above implies that the English language teacher in most cases had the responsibility to determine how he/she used the limited time at his/her disposal. The issue of 'frequency' of practice therefore depended to a large extent on how much time a teacher had at his/her disposal for teaching, and how much (additional) time he was willing to sacrifice for written error corrections.

These findings confirm findings from Feedback Analysis (FA) of student exercise books that written error corrections were provided intermittently. Evidences of written error corrections in all three schools showed scant number of exercises, as well as high degree of inconsistencies in written corrections provided. Most of the exercise books analyzed had varying number and forms of written corrections provided by different English language teachers even in the same schools. The studies conducted by Khanlarzadeh and Taheri (2017); Wei and Yiqian (2020); Soleimani and Rahimi (2021); Yang et al. (2021); Hopper and Bowen (2023) all of which looked into what teachers think and do about written corrective feedback (WCF) confirm the complex nature of providing WCF in schools. While similarities exist in teachers' beliefs and preferences, notable discrepancies also exist in terms of their ability to practice their beliefs. These discrepancies may be the result of factors such as variations in professional training, cultural influences, and contextual constraints such as time limitations and attitude of students, etc. These may result in the number of incongruences that were found in this study in terms of usefulness, timing and frequency of providing WCF to writing students.

4.2 How is the practice of written error correction carried out in selected schools?

For purposes of determining how written error correction is carried out in selected schools, two thematic concerns were considered: Strategies teachers employ (Direct, Indirect, Metalinguistic) and approaches (**Focused/Unfocused; Individualized WCF/ General WCF; Revision**)

4.2.1 Strategies Teachers Employ (Direct, Indirect, Metalinguistic)

This section presents a detailed analysis of the descriptive data on the feedback strategies employed by teachers in selected schools during their professional practice. The analysis includes a comprehensive overview of the various methods and techniques teachers use to provide feedback to their students, highlighting the frequency and context of their application.

4.2.2 Indirect Written Corrective Feedback

Results from the interview sessions generally revealed preponderant use of Indirect WCF by teachers in selected schools. The reports portrayed immense reliance on Indirect written error correction strategies relative to the Direct strategy in all three schools. According to the teachers, though they use both Direct and Indirect strategies, they are most

likely to use the Indirect strategy since it is relatively easier to provide. In the words of one of the teachers, *the indirect strategy is much easier and makes me mark faster*. Another teacher also indicated, *in fact, the Indirect strategy in the form of circling or underlining points where learners have difficulty, it really helps to cater for more of my students*. It was also reported by some other teachers that the question mark (?) and omission (^) symbols were sometimes used as means of pointing learners to their errors. The findings from feedback analysis revealed extensive use of indirect written corrections at the expense of both Direct and Metalinguistic strategy. In most of the exercises (essays) analyzed, teacher corrections mostly came in the form of ringing and underlining errors.

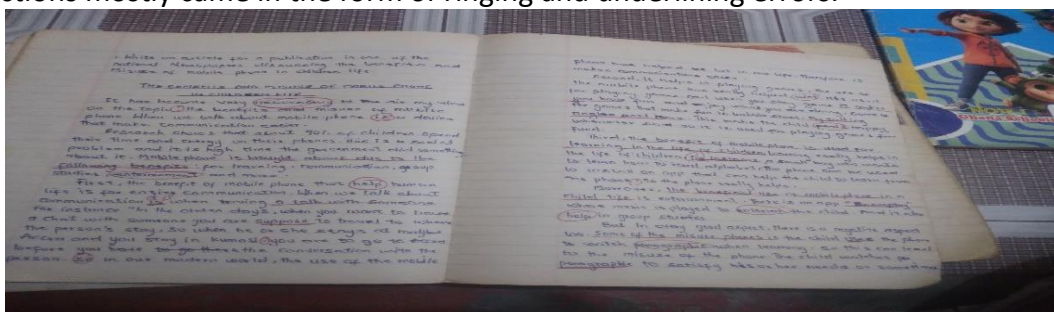


Fig. (4.2) Student exercise – Indirect WCF

The image above represents a teacher's reliance on Indirect error correction strategy in feedback provision. Most of the teachers indicated that they practice Indirect written error corrections because they believed that students have a role to play in the correction process. According to them, the Indirect correction strategy allowed their learners to engage cognitive processes in trying to figure out what their errors are as well as the correct forms. For instance, one of the teachers said *it is better to allow students think through their errors and correct them than just 'spoon feed' them*. Another teacher who believed students learnt better when allowed to find out correct answers to their errors also said, *most of the time when students come out with the correct answers to their errors, they tend to remember them better than when the teacher gives it to him*.

These findings align with findings from the study undertaken by Thonus (2002) that L2 writing teachers prefer indirect WCF because it is a much politer and less-intimidating form of feedback than direct WCF; Ferris (2003; 2007) posits that Indirect WCF gives students the opportunity to correct their own errors which, in the long run, reduces their dependency on the teacher as well as improve proficiency through student centeredness and autonomy. Again, Ferris (1997) contends that indirect error corrections in the form of mere identification of errors, is more beneficial than direct correction. He argues that Indirect error correction strategy usually 'pushes' learners to engage in hypothesis testing on their own, deepens internal processing and thereby help them to internalize the correct forms of linguistic structures. This stance however, contrasts Chandler's (2003) study which emphasized that teacher Direct error corrections helped ESL students to internalize the correct forms in more productive ways. According to him, even though indirect feedback demanded greater cognitive processing, it had the potential of unnecessarily delaying the confirmation of students' hypothesis testing, which could ultimately delay the learning of language. He reported that the Direct written error correction was the strategy that was most favored by her ESL students.

Findings from student questionnaires in this study revealed that most of the students expressed opposition to the Indirect strategy (underlining and ringing), since they claimed

that they did not in most cases understand or get what their teachers really meant. Most of the students reported that they had several challenges or difficulties with the indirect strategy. For example, a student reported that her English language teacher's written corrections usually get her confused as she finds it difficult to figure out what the teacher means/expects. She said, *the teacher only underlines some of my work and I don't know what is wrong with it*. Indeed, most of the challenges that students found with the Indirect strategies (ringing / underlining) had to do with difficulty in determining what the teacher meant and also being able to provide the correct forms as teachers could use both ringing and underlining in the same exercise. A student helplessly reported that *sometimes when I write essay, the teacher only underlines with the red pen*. Besides the difficulties students have with understanding their teachers' indirect corrections, other students also reported difficulties in finding what the correct forms should be. This, according to the students causes delay in their responses to the written corrections, some of which they completely ignore. These findings agree with the study conducted by Zhang et al. (2021) which revealed that Indirect WCF (underlining) was the least preferred strategy, as a result of which students were generally ambivalent about the effectiveness of underlining on grammatical, lexical and orthographic errors.

4.2.3 Direct Written Corrective Feedback

In this study, the teachers reported that their use of the Direct written corrections was occasioned by the nature of exercises and sometimes errors students committed over and over. They also reported they used the Direct strategy when they expected their students to take note of specific linguistic items or structures. They then indicated that most of the exercises that focused on form such as article, spelling, preposition, etc, attracted the Direct written error correction strategy (providing the correct forms). In the words of one of the teachers, *providing correct forms makes students see the correct forms and quickly adjust their learning*.

These findings confirm the findings from the study of Ferris (2010) that Direct corrections provided efficient models that learners could reproduce in their subsequent writing. Even though teachers in this study talk positively about the Direct strategy, they rarely used the Direct strategy when marking their students' essays. This, according to one of them was due to the complex nature of errors students usually commit in their essays. He explained, *sometimes, it's as if you should rewrite the entire essay for the student, and you can imagine if you have to provide answers to every error you find*. Another teacher also commented that providing answers to every error they found in essays tend to make the practice quite burdensome for the teacher. He added that doing this will certainly not be too good for both the teacher and the students: *it takes a lot of time marking essays for students and so trying to provide correct answers to every error means so much work for the teacher, you see?* These findings however contrast the findings of the study conducted by Ayele (2019), where teachers adopted the Direct strategy as the principal means of providing written corrections; most of which yielded positive results for students' learning.

In this study, even though teachers found it burdensome to provide Direct written corrections to students, students considered it much more effective for their learning. Generally, most students reported that they learned better when their teachers provided the correct answers to their errors. For instance, a student reported, *I easily revise my teachers' corrections any time my English teacher provides the correct answers*. Another student added that when the English language teacher provides the correct answers, he sees

where he was wrong and so makes sure he does not repeat it. He indicated that *when I'm wrong and the teacher shows me the right answer, I always remember so I don't get it wrong again*. Some other students also reported that they found it better the few times their teachers used both direct and Indirect and sometimes comments on their exercises.

While students reported that the Direct strategy worked well for them, most of them preferred combinations of either Direct-indirect strategy or Direct or indirect with the teachers' comments or explanations. A student remarked, *I want my teacher to explain it to me so I can understand well*.

4.2.4 Metalinguistic Feedback

Metalinguistic feedback was used rather minimally by teachers in this study. Most of the teachers indicated in their reports that metalinguistic comments were not used alone. They were used as forms of explanation, most of which complemented Direct and Indirect WCF. Some of the teachers felt that Direct or Indirect WCF was inadequate for dealing with the kind of errors their students committed. One of the teachers noted *I sometimes call my students and pass on comments about their performance to them. I also indicate in the form of written comments how or what they should look at in their written work*. Another teacher mentioned times or occasions during which he used metalinguistic comments. He stated that *I use metalinguistic comments especially when there is a recurring error that I think I need to draw learners' attention to*.

These comments show that Metalinguistic comments were used as backup/support for the two main strategies (Direct/Indirect). The teachers claimed that Metalinguistic comments were used mostly in addition to either of the two strategies, the results proved amazing, and such errors hardly resurfaced. This is in agreement with what Sheen (2011) found that long-term gains considerably accrued to the Direct metalinguistic group, suggesting then, that the explicit knowledge gained from the metalinguistic feedback contributed to long-lasting effects of Corrective Feedback.

It is worth noting that in this study, the researchers recorded no evidence of Metalinguistic Feedback during analysis of students' exercise books (FA). This confirms claims made by teachers in this study that Metalinguistic feedback they provided, which they considered useful was mostly oral. As it was reported in the study conducted by Alkhatib (2015), the importance of discussing common errors orally in class after correcting their students' writing was numerous. It was clear from the study that about half of the teachers who added oral explanations/discussion to written corrections registered multiple benefits. Students could remember their mistakes and were much more aware of the mistakes they committed.

Besides the report on using either Direct or Indirect strategies separately, teachers spoke about instances that made them resort to the use of a combination of Direct and Indirect strategies within a particular exercise. In most cases, the teachers used the strategies based on what they thought was convenient, given the nature of the exercises and the time available. The third teacher reported that *there are instances when students commit varying errors, some of which may have to do with spelling, articles as well as structural errors, all occurring in a whole sentence. When such errors occur in the same exercise, then learners' errors would be corrected either directly or indirectly and sometimes with both*.

In all, evidence from reports teachers gave revealed that teachers used all three strategies, however, in varying proportions. Indirect written error corrections were the most

exploited due to the ease with which teachers practiced it. This was followed by the Direct strategy, with the metalinguistic being the least exploited. Teachers again exploited a combination of both Direct and Indirect strategies in their practice of error correction. This was done when teachers felt that their corrections were not understood and the errors kept coming. From the reports, combination of (Direct + Indirect) and (Indirect + metalinguistic) strategies proved more successful for student learning. This was confirmed by the students in their reports of strategies that helped them in their learning.

4.3 Approaches to the Practice (Focused/Unfocused; Individualized WCF/ General WCF; Revision)

This section aims to investigate how teachers in selected schools implement written error correction in English language classrooms.

4.3.1 Amount of WCF Practice (Comprehensive/ Unfocused Vrs Focused)

This section presents data on actual feedback practices of teachers in selected schools. To examine whether teachers practiced selective or comprehensive WCF, data from interviews and teachers' feedback analysis (FA) were used. This information was compared with responses from students' open-ended questionnaires to verify and determine the preferences of students.

The results from the interviews revealed that teachers followed a similar approach in correcting errors. Most teachers reported practicing comprehensive feedback, believing all errors should be identified and corrected to inform students of their performance. For example, one teacher described his practice: *"I mostly deal with the comprehensive. I believe that focusing on some errors may send wrong signals to the learners."* Another teacher confirmed that marking all errors gave a clear indication of learners' progress. Data from FA revealed that most teacher corrections were comprehensive. In most analyzed exercises, teachers corrected almost all student errors. These observations confirm the interview reports and align with studies by Ferris (2006) and Lee (2004; 2008) that most ESL teachers provide comprehensive written error corrections, believing it captures all learner errors and paints clearer pictures of learner proficiencies. These findings also align with Zhang & Cheng (2021), who found that continuous and comprehensive written CF can improve students' writing accuracy and fluency.

Data from FA also revealed that some teachers selectively corrected errors, especially in exercises focused on form. Most errors that received selective corrections were form-focused. This information confirms interview data indicating that teachers selectively corrected errors in form-focused exercises, as one teacher noted: *"I use focused WCF on specific occasions such as correcting errors on spelling and punctuation. If I mark every error, my students may be discouraged."*

These findings confirm existing research on the usefulness of selective/focused written error correction in SLA research. Burt (1975) proposed that selective error correction may be more effective cognitively and affectively than an "all-out" correction method, especially if based on the communicative effect of errors. Chunrao et al. (2022) found focused/selective WCF more beneficial due to its manageable cognitive load, particularly for students with moderate language proficiency, allowing learners to focus on revising grammar or allocating efforts to different components of a new task.

4.3.2 General or Differentiated Written Error Corrections

The practice of written error correction, although common in all three schools, largely overlooked the interests and preferences of students. Almost all teachers in this study reported that their written error corrections rarely considered individual needs. Teacher interviews revealed that feedback was generally provided to all students, without regard for specific needs or error types. One teacher remarked, *"I provide feedback to all students generally, not depending on whoever you are."* Another stated, *"Errors are errors and they need to be corrected. I correct them as I think I should, not based on the students' needs."* Two other teachers simply said, *"No, I don't think that is necessary; No, I don't consider individual needs, I give the same feedback to everyone."* Some teachers mentioned time constraints as a reason for not providing tailored feedback, with one explaining, *"The time available for a teacher to teach and mark student exercises would not permit me to be asking what students' preferences are. The students have to find ways of understanding the feedback I provide."* Another teacher added, *"Does it matter at all? If the student will apply the corrections, he/she will. But this is the case where most of these students do not even pay any attention to the corrections they receive."* Lastly, a teacher asserted, *"I don't think different strategies should be used for different students, since they are all taught in the same context."*

These responses indicated that teachers provided generalized corrections, showing a lack of consideration for individual learner needs. This suggests that teachers in the selected schools were indifferent to whether their corrections effectively aided students' language development. Data from student questionnaires indicated that some students struggled to understand their teachers' written corrections. One student noted, *"I do my corrections, but sometimes I don't understand what the teacher means."* Another expressed confusion when the teacher *"rings"* some words and *"underlines"* others. Yet another student commented, *"If the teacher underlines so many things in my work, I don't know which of them I should do."*

These findings suggest that the general nature of written feedback provided, together with the neglect of individual needs, made it difficult for learners to process and act on corrections. Most students indicated a general lack of understanding of their teachers' written corrections. Consequently, revision of corrected texts was minimal in all three schools. Students attributed the apparent lack of revision to the nature of their teachers' correction strategies as well as insufficient attention provided to ensure that students understood the corrections. It is evident that teachers used a generalized approach to written corrections, possibly neglecting key aspects of learner needs that could improve language learning. The researchers are of the opinion that such non-differentiated approaches could lead to persistent gaps in learners' language development. Additionally, such approaches could cause certain errors to become ingrained due to the lack of focused attention. Finally, the researchers believe that lack of personalized feedback could result in higher forms of resentment and inhibitions among students towards the learning of the English language.

5. Conclusion

This paper looked into the perspectives and practices of English language teachers and students in terms of written error corrections in their schools of practice. The study had the context of three senior high schools from categories A, B, and C in the Ashanti region of Ghana. A sample size of 824 students was sampled using systematic random sampling; nine

English language teachers who taught those students were purposively selected. The findings of the study have indicated that teachers believe in the potency of written error corrections in developing students' language, and so provide written error corrections to their English language writing students. It was also revealed that most students perceived WCF positively and confirmed that WCF gave them confidence and helped them learn the language better as was revealed in Aluf (2024). However, variances exist in the expectations of students regarding the strategies they prefer and those adopted by English language teachers in carrying out their practice, resulting in poor revision and potential learnability of corrected linguistic forms. Again, discrepancies exist between the belief English language teachers in this study have about written corrective feedback and how they practice it. The study concludes that while written corrective feedback is prevalent in the selected schools, it fails to meet the learning needs and preferences of students, thus not contributing effectively to language learning. This is primarily because the feedback provided by teachers is often not well-targeted, making it difficult for students to identify gaps in their interlanguage. Consequently, students do not derive the desired benefits from written error corrections as established in the literature.

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