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PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners respond to Icy Lee's 'Teacher written corrective feedback: Less is more'

Gerry McLellan

Aichi University of Education, Nagoya, Japan
Email: geraldmclellan@hotmail.com

1. Introduction

In her article, Icy Lee (2019, pp. 524–536) discusses the differences between comprehensive written corrective feedback (CWCF) and focused written corrective feedback (FWCF). She argues that teachers should concentrate more on focused feedback, and highlight and correct only a few grammar errors or issues with organisation, for example, instead of marking every single mistake made by a student. In this paper, I will critically analyse the points she makes and argue that her opinions, while valid in many respects, are not substantiated enough to persuade teachers to follow her lead.

2. Problems associated with CWCF

Lee (2019, pp. 525–526) states the problems associated with CWCF for teachers and students and counters with arguments for using CWFC. The main issues for teachers and students are:

Teachers
- The time it takes to comment on and grade papers.
- They see themselves as merely teachers of grammar.
- Wrong pedagogical messages can be sent by teachers to students.

Students
- They are overwhelmed and confused by too much feedback.
- They lose motivation.

Each year I teach at the University of Glasgow on the summer pre-sessional English for academic purposes (EAP) course. This is a bridging course for international students who are non-native speakers of English wishing to participate in a programme of full-time study at the university. Participants have to achieve a pass grade to commence their full-time studies.

Feedback to students during the intensive course is in-depth and informative, and provides comprehensive advice on areas such as task fulfilment, organisation, use of sources, use of language and academic style. Students have to submit a first draft essay and then a final version.[1] Upon correction of the first draft, teachers consult with students and advise them on what they should do to improve their work. Having just returned from teaching on this course (summer 2020), I can report that teachers do complain about the time it takes to provide informed and accurate feedback on writing to second language (L2) students. At induction, pre-sessional teachers are guided on how much time to spend on marking essays and providing feedback, They are also given two full days to grade[2] and

[1]I have used the term 'final version' here as students are permitted two versions only. However, during the course, the term 'final draft' is used as it is assumed students edit their essays several times.

[2]Grading entails providing students with a numerical score, i.e. 5.5, 6.0, 6.5, according to the IELTS system; marking entails correcting or drawing attention to errors.

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write comments on approximately 24 papers; however, many teachers failed to complete the grading within the given timeframe. Indeed, this year (2020) one teacher took as many as five days to return the feedback. She said that she had reviewed her initial feedback and decided to re-mark everything. Lee (2019, p. 525) mentions that 'teachers are faced with enormous pressure … to return timely feedback' and that some teachers cope better than others. In addition, studies have shown that teachers can mark the same essay differently on a separate occasion, and that factors such as time of day and mood when marking can have an effect. This is a problem, but safeguards are in place for students who receive low grades, for example, any essay receiving a fail grade is reviewed by a second teacher and a third if necessary.

Most of the course teachers work outside of Scotland during the year and return to Glasgow to work each summer. The staff comprises a regular cohort of returning teachers along with some new faces. The more experienced teachers are asked to mentor new arrivals to ensure continuity and there are also regular standardisation meetings. Thus, teachers should know how to grade students' essays. Teachers are asked to mark one paragraph for grammar and another for organisation, for example, but the majority seem to comment on the entire essay. Many do not do as requested, which suggests that it is difficult for teachers to focus on just one or two grammar points, instead preferring to provide detailed feedback in an attempt to improve students' final version. Lee (2019, p. 525) states that marking papers in full 'makes writing teachers feel that they are simply "marking machines" that repeat the same tedious job mechanically'. However, when offered the opportunity to do less marking, some teachers clearly find it difficult to do so. Lee also mentions that teachers, 'are sending students unintended messages that are not desirable and conducive to student learning', but I would argue that by not marking, the wrong message can be received by students.

Lee (2019, p. 525) discusses the fact that students may be overwhelmed and lose motivation upon 'receiving papers flooded with red ink'. Lamb, Sri, and Nilwati (2017) make a similar point, which is that teachers should not make too many corrections as this is likely to prevent students from performing well.

My own class action research project on corrective feedback (McLellan, 2019) has shown contrasting results wherein students who are provided with detailed correction demonstrated radically greater improvement than those who received minimal feedback, i.e. the total number of errors made decreased from 845 to 615 over three periods. My research was carried out on three classes of around 40 students over three 90-minute class periods. The research was conducted among mixed-sex classes of university students majoring in economics, politics and law, and they had already received at least six years of grammar instruction.

Lee (2019, p. 526) suggests that teachers may successfully provide feedback on organisation and structure at the expense of grammar. However, in my study, students in the three groups were provided with different levels of feedback and commentary on their written work. The class that received the most detailed written feedback, or in Lee's words (p. 524) 'red ink', rather than being discouraged or losing motivation, showed considerable subsequent improvement in word order, grammar and organisation. This class also showed most improvement overall in terms of both organisation and grammar.

My findings contradict Lee's suggestions and appear to show that students can focus on a number of error corrections at one time. It is of interest that Modirkhamene, Soleimani, and Sadeghi (2017, p. 204) discuss how selective feedback can help improve student ability, but also state that teachers should continue to employ CWFC so that they communicate with students on a one-to-one basis. (I do accept that with younger or less able learners it might be more incumbent upon instructors to focus on fewer points to avoid confusing or de-motivating students.) I suggest that teachers in Asia in general and in Japan in particular should tread carefully when limiting the amount of feedback they provide, especially for novice learners. Students often feel they need guidance, and until they become more competent and more confident, it may be more beneficial to provide detailed feedback and correction. For example, on a number of occasions, I have asked students to sit in groups of four and correct each other's papers. Students' feedback received on exercises like this shows that they do

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not feel comfortable looking for errors in the written work of others, so careful guidance and extensive scaffolding would be required to help them overcome their lack of confidence.

Brown (2007, pp. 132–145) discusses learner strategies and states that good learners 'take charge of their own learning' and 'make errors work for them'. He also discusses how class surveys can help teachers recognize the different personalities of their students. Thus, it appears that there are various approaches available to teachers; personally, I try to adapt my lesson plans according to class size, student ability levels, motivation and reasons for study. Lee, on the other hand, seems to suggest a one-size-fits-all approach in her FWCF style of feedback. I believe that as teachers, it is our duty to provide students with the skills and know-how to tackle language acquisition in a manner best suited to their needs.

On a final point, findings from Andersson's paper (2011, pp. 1–17) suggest that some feedback is more beneficial than no feedback and that it is the job of the educator to 'equip students with a range of strategies and tools to help them become more independent self-editors and language editors'.

3. Benefits associated with FWCF

Lee (2019, pp. 526–528) suggests that there are a number of benefits to be had for teachers and students by adopting FWFC. These include:

Teachers
- They can save time and energy.
- They can concentrate on commenting on other areas such as content and organisation.
- They can return feedback in a timely fashion.
- A more encouraging and relaxed classroom atmosphere is obtained.
- Feedback becomes purposeful and meaningful.
- They can collaborate rather than work in isolation.

Students
- They can focus on feedback to develop writing competence rather than focus on grammar.
- WCF is less confusing and intimidating.
- They are more likely to take risks.
- They can build fluency.
- Fewer corrections mean that WCF becomes more manageable for them. (I assume that by 'manageable', Lee is implying that students are able to cope with fewer corrections but might feel swamped when receiving a paper containing a multitude of error corrections.)

Saving time and energy is a top priority for most of us, and teachers are certainly no exception. While it is true that teachers can save time by addressing fewer errors in student written work, I remain unconvinced that this actually benefits students. This year at the University of Glasgow, I was given the opportunity to review some final versions of students' work. Students had to write one 1,500-word essay from a choice of six topics. They had to provide references and show originality and critical thinking. Teachers provided feedback on the first drafts and pointed out where errors existed in some paragraphs, but not all. Although I did not have time to read the final versions in full, it was apparent to me that a number of students had only attended to the sections that had been corrected by the teacher. Much of the content remained unchanged between first and final versions in those parts of the essays that had not received feedback or correction. This suggests that students were either under the impression that they had only to correct those parts that had been commented on, or that the other sections of the paper were without error.

As Lee (2019, p. 529) suggests, if we want to encourage student autonomy and help students develop their writing skills, teachers have to make the fact that errors exist much more explicit. Perhaps a simple number depicting the number of errors at the end of each paragraph might at least inform students as to how many errors they should attend to. In this way, teachers could still save time, and students would be under no illusion as to the number of errors they have to correct. For the pre-sessional course, teachers have a list of descriptors to help with grading. Each descriptor falls within a set grade. This system also

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enables them to provide detailed feedback with a focus on a number of language errors. Students are then able to arm themselves with this knowledge and better attend to their shortcomings. As a team leader for the course, I am responsible for proofreading final student reports. These are written by teachers and contain numerous errors. I recall one such report where the teacher informed me that she had checked her writing several times and assured me that it was error-free. I discovered a number of typos and other errors, even within the first sentence! If it is so difficult for native speakers to self-edit their work, it seems to me to be rather unfair to expect L2 speakers to self-edit theirs.

4. Problems associated with FWFC

Lee (2019, p. 528) then discusses impediments to FWFC and argues why they are not valid arguments. The barriers are the beliefs that:

- Students should be told all errors to avoid making the same mistakes again.
- The purpose of WCF is to improve written accuracy in general and not just a small number of errors.
- It is confusing for students if only some errors are corrected.

Chen, Hossein, and Qian's (2016, p. 2) research findings show that students do want to receive detailed and informed feedback. Indeed, my own research findings, both qualitative and quantitative, corroborate this viewpoint. Taferner (2015), too, suggests that CWCF helps students improve upon their grammar skills in a number of areas. However, Lee (2019) talks about 'less, but more quality WCF' being better for students on a number of occasions.

I do not see how teachers can correct essays comprehensively and show students how many errors of one particular kind they are making as this would be overly time-consuming. Indeed, I am collaborating with a colleague to devise assessment software that will do exactly that. The software aims to help teachers quickly point out where errors lie, correlate the frequency and type of error, and send feedback combined with teacher commentary and advice to students via their mobile phones. Teachers should not have to correct all errors, especially with university students, as the latter should have learnt from basic grammar feedback during their junior and high school years. However, teachers can still highlight shortcomings, thereby raising students' awareness levels regarding errors. If students are informed of the frequency and type of errors they make in real time via software, they then have numbers and percentages of errors and error types to work with and could, over time, see improvement in their written work. I frequently encourage my students to time themselves when reading and writing and thus note how quickly they are able to process language. Measuring the number of errors we make, seeing how quickly we write or read, and how we can be creative with the L2 all contribute to identifying our starting point and objective.

I have suggested that students are not particularly good at self-editing. Therefore, I believe that if teachers do not correct everything, they should point out where errors lie, or at the very least, provide students with the number of errors they need to attend to; otherwise, students will spend too much time looking for errors that may not exist. Lee (2019, p. 528) mentions that a major problem associated with FWCF is that students may be confused if only some errors are corrected. If teachers point out in their feedback that they are only focusing on tense or only focusing on organisation, for example, I do not think students will be confused. However, as a teacher, I agree it is difficult to focus only on one or two points in any kind of student writing. It is like entering a messy kitchen after a party and only washing the saucers and knives. We have a strong desire to tidy everything. It is nearly impossible to focus on one or two items at the expense of all others.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I initially focused on the main points made by Lee in her paper. She first discussed problems faced by teachers and students when using CWFC (Section 2). The points she raises are valid,

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I feel. I mentioned that in my experience as a team leader I heard many teachers complain about the amount of marking they have to do. However, I found that, even when teachers are asked to focus on certain points, they persist in marking every mistake they encounter. Lee suggests workshops would help with this problem, but gives little advice on how they should be run.

Lee then describes the benefits of FWCF (Section 3). I agree that saving time would enable teachers to focus on teaching and not simply assessing and grading. However, I suggest that some teachers lack organisational skills and are unable to return written work in a timely manner (Section 4). Perhaps, instead of focusing on how teachers can provide less feedback, selected teachers need to attend workshops on or receive training in how to mark and grade papers comprehensively and efficiently. In addition, I do not agree that feedback becomes more meaningful when only a small portion of an essay is attended to.

Finally, I suggested educators have to be sensitive and empathetic to the needs of their students. Teachers should be able to tinker with various teaching methods to discover what works best for their students in each particular class and should never assume a one-size-fits-all mentality.

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Gerry McLellan lives and works in Nagoya, Japan. His main teaching position is at Aichi University of Education, and he is also employed as a team leader on the University of Glasgow pre-sessional summer EAP course. Additionally, he is adviser to the *JALT* magazine, *The Language Teacher* and a published author of English as a foreign language (EFL) books. He is also an associate fellow in TEAP and has recently completed his portfolio for full fellowship. At the moment he is working on a new textbook with a focus on reading skills as well as collaborating with a colleague to develop assessment software for EFL.

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