The Justification of Teacher-guided Error Correction of Chinese College Students’ English Writing

WANG Weihong & DONG Yuanxing
China University of Geosciences (Wuhan)

Abstract
An experimental study was conducted to gain insights into the efficacy of teacher-guided error correction (EC) practice in Chinese college students’ English writing. Through comparison of the experimental group (EG) with the control group (CG), this study revealed that before EC treatment, no significant difference was found between the EG and CG in writing fluency, accuracy and writing quality. The participants in CG even enjoyed better self-editing ability. However, after 12 weeks the EG outperformed the CG, in self-editing ability, in writing accuracy and in writing quality. Although the two groups showed no statistical difference in writing fluency, both improved their fluency over one semester. This study offers new evidence to support the practice of teacher-guided error feedback on pedagogical grounds.

Key words: error correction; self-editing ability; writing fluency; writing accuracy; writing quality

1. Introduction
In the past half century, language researchers and teachers have conducted a wide range of studies on the practice of error correction (EC). However, due to the extensive differences in design, the findings of these studies are inconclusive, and this makes it impossible to transplant the present EC findings into English writing teaching in China. As to the present Chinese college English writing EC practice, it is commonly accepted that EC is a time-consuming but ineffective task for teachers. Teachers especially need certain experimental findings to validate their labor. Chinese students admit they need correction of their compositions, yet they still repeat the same kinds of errors in nearly every composition.
Up to now, the experimental studies on EC in China have been scarce (Yang, 1996). This study intended to cast light on the paradoxical viewpoints of both teachers and students towards EC in mainland China’s foreign language writing instruction.

2. Literature review

Error analysis (EA), as the term suggests, is the study and analysis of errors committed by language learners. One of the purposes of doing EA is to identify the principles that could guide effective EC. The experimental studies of EC since the 1970s have focused mainly on the five questions framed by Hendrickson (1978):

1. Should student writers’ errors in compositions be corrected?
2. How should students’ composition errors be corrected?
3. What kind of errors should be corrected?
4. When should the errors be corrected?
5. Who is to correct these errors?

While teachers are involved in error correcting, researchers are mainly concerned about the efficacy of EC, and the EC strategies utilized.

Many researchers claim that teachers’ EC has a positive effect on reducing language errors (Chandler, 2003; Fathan & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997; Lizotte, 2001), improving accuracy in language use (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, Chandler, 2000, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008, Ferris, 1997, 2006; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross & Shortred, 1986; Sheen, 2007), and no negative influence on writing fluency (Chandler, 2003; Lizotte, 2001; Robb et al., 1986). Nevertheless, there are also a large number of negative research results on this issue (Kepner, 1991; Polio, Fleck & Leder, 1998; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 2004). Sheppard (1992) pointed out that in his research, neither CG nor EG had any significant difference in either the quantity of errors or the accuracy and fluency in the sequential compositions. In 1996, Truscott wrote an article on language learning contending that “all forms of EC are not only ineffective but potentially harmful and should be abandoned”.

As to EC strategies, researchers’ opinions vary as to whether selective or comprehensive correction is a preferable strategy for EC (Bitchener, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2003; Sheen, 2007). Selective correction means choosing several major patterns of errors in a student paper to mark; comprehensive correction attempts to address all errors in one composition. Another important distinction is between direct and indirect feedback, to borrow terms used by Hendrickson (1978). Direct feedback is provided when the teacher writes the correct form onto the student’s paper. Indirect feedback, on the other hand, requires the student to engage in “guided problem-solving” (Lalande, 1982) when the teacher indicates that an error has occurred through underlining, circling, highlighting or otherwise noting the error. Research evidence indicates that direct correction is more suitable for elementary learners or those errors untreatable by learners themselves (Ferris & Helt,
indirect feedback brings more benefits to students’ long-term writing development (Ferris, 2003; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982). Several other studies (Bitchener, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008; Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984) compared direct correction with indirect correction. Robb et al. (1986) and Semke (1984) found no difference between these two types of correction; while other researchers found that students prefer direct correction to indirect correction and direct correction had more positive effects on them (Bitchener, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008).

When specific categories of written errors were targeted for research, there were significantly different rates of student achievement and progress across error types (Bitchener, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 2004; Robb et al., 1986). In discussing the larger subcategories of “treatable” and “untreatable” errors, Ferris (2003) found that teachers were more likely to give indirect feedback to treatable errors and direct feedback to untreatable errors, and that these patterns affected both short- and long-term student progress.

As to students’ ability to self-edit or self-correct errors, several studies have examined the effects of error feedback on student ability to edit their papers from one draft to the next. In an experimental classroom study, Fathman & Whally (1990) found that students in two feedback groups who received error feedback had significantly fewer grammatical errors on a revised draft than groups who received only content feedback or no feedback at all. In a study of university-level Spanish language students, Frantzen & Rissel (1987) found that students were able to edit 93% of errors marked in various linguistic categories during a ten-minute in-class editing session. Ferris et al. (2000) also found that students were able to edit successfully about 80% of the errors marked by their teachers.

In examining the body of research on this topic, it is immediately apparent that the studies have very little in common. The existing research base does not adequately address the “big question” (Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 2004): Does error feedback help L2 student writers? Although there are a number of studies which compared the effects of different methods of EC, very few studies had compared “correction” versus “no correction” in L2 student writing. Some studies utilize control groups and others do not.

Furthermore, the studies in the research base are fundamentally incomparable because of inconsistencies in design. First, these studies vary on just about every research parameter imaginable: subject demographics (for instance, American college foreign language students versus ESL students versus EFL students), size of sample and treatment groups, duration of treatment or study period, types of writing being considered, types of feedback being given, who was to provide error feedback, how errors were defined and how accuracy and improvement were measured. Second, none of the studies constitute “replication” of the others. Because of the lack of studies that are both controlled and longitudinal, there is little evidence based help to answer the question “Does error feedback help?”

Two other questions require further exploration. If EC helps to improve writing accuracy, is this improvement acquired at the sacrifice of writing fluency, as Truscott (1996, 1999) claimed? The current research of EC on writing fluency reveals different pictures on this point (Chandler, 2003; Truscott, 2007). There are many elements and characteristics of student writing that determine its overall quality. No experienced L2 writing instructor
would argue that the number of linguistic errors made by the students represents the sum total of the text’s merit. Only a few available studies have explicitly examined the relation of writing accuracy to writing quality between students who have received error feedback and those who have not, and these studies have reported conflicting results (Chandler, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Kepner, 1991; Polio et al., 1998).

Finally, in recent years, increasing attention has been given to the importance of autonomy in language learning. Autonomy has in fact become a buzzword and a central theme in language learning and teaching. Do we still need teachers to spoon-feed students with corrections to their written English? The author holds that although autonomous learning will assist learners in applying knowledge acquired in a given context to different situations, learners’ autonomy cannot be analyzed and fulfilled thoroughly without taking into account teachers’ roles in correlated interaction of teaching and learning. Teachers should offer guidance to help students notice any inappropriateness in language output so as to better master the target language.

The present study was undertaken to address the “big question” and at the same time gain insight into effective error correction practice. With all other aspects of Hendrickson’s five questions clearly defined, this research intends to address, from the following four aspects, the question—Do college students need teacher-guided error correction in their English writing?

1. Will teacher-guided EC help to improve students’ ability to self-edit their papers over time?
2. Will teacher-guided EC influence L2 students’ writing fluency over time?
3. Will teacher-guided EC help to improve students’ writing accuracy over time?
4. Will teacher-guided EC help to improve students’ writing quality over time?

3. Methods

3.1 Participants
The participants in this study were sophomores from two intact English writing classes, and they were in their third semester in China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) when the experiment was carried out. During the study, 106 students’ attendance for the writing course and their completion of the weekly composition for the course were recorded. At the end of the semester, those who had any record of being absent from this course or who had not completed all of the eleven weekly compositions were excluded from the study. Therefore, in total 47 students in the CG and 48 students in the EG were included as the participants in the study.

3.2 Experimental procedures
In China University of Geosciences, college English teaching is carried out in the first two years of the four-year undergraduate program. In the first academic year, students are required to take an English listening and speaking class (twice a week for eight weeks and each time ninety minutes) and an English reading class (once a week for ten weeks, each time ninety minutes). In the second academic year, students are required to take an English listening and speaking class (once a week for eight weeks, each time ninety minutes), an
English reading class (once a week for ten weeks, each time ninety minutes) and an English writing class (once a week for twelve weeks, each time ninety minutes). The three different courses are given separately by three college English teachers. This experiment was carried out in a twelve-week writing course designed especially for all non-English majors as part of the college English teaching program. During this writing course, basic writing styles and writing skills were introduced once a week. Both the EG and CG received the same tutorial under the same instructor-researcher.

In the first week, both groups were given 45 minutes in class to write a composition titled “My College Life” with no length limit. All the subsequent composition tasks were given in the same way with only a title and no other directions. Students were required to write out of class additional ten compositions any length they like after each lecture. There was no time limit for out-of-class composing.

For both groups, the first composition was given error feedback (see, in the example below, how error feedback was conducted) and was graded by the teacher using the CET 4 writing scoring rubrics. No additional comments were made. During the next class, a ten-minute session was assigned for both the EG and CG to make revisions according to the teacher’s feedback. During this session, the teacher only answered questions concerning clarity of the error feedback. If students could not read the teacher’s feedback, the teacher explained it at that time. However, as to how to correct the errors, the teacher gave no help.

For the EG, this error-feedback practice and in-class correcting practice was conducted throughout the whole semester. For the CG, compositions from the second week on were only graded with no error feedback given.

Comprehensive EC was given to student compositions for the EG throughout the semester and for the CG during the first week. The three major categories of “local” errors were treated: grammatical errors like tense, article, voice, noun ending, and sentence structure; lexical errors like word choice, collocation, and word form; and mechanical errors like spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. An indirect method of giving error feedback was used, that is, underlining the place of the error, and briefly describing the error type. Error codes were not used but Chinese was used in description of errors in student essays. The following is an example to show how feedback was given by the teacher:

```
My grandmother is 80 years old, but she looks very health. Different for any other people in this age, she likes do sports like play ping-pang ball and had winned the gold medal in our town’s Ping-pang competition.
```

In the eleventh week of the writing course, another in-class composition task was conducted for both the EG and CG with the same procedure as carried out in the first week. The title of the composition was “The Youth of Today”. The other conditions were kept the same.
3.3 Data collection and analysis
The student compositions in both the EG and CG of the first week and the eleventh week were collected and word processed with the permission of the students. Three independent raters who had had at least three years’ experience of teaching English writing were invited to grade these compositions according to the rating rubrics of the annual CET4 writing examination. The three raters had all been CET4 writing raters for at least two years. Together with the teacher-researcher herself, one of the three raters was selected to calculate the number of clauses and errors in each of the pre- and post-test compositions. Cronbach’s alpha analysis showed that the inter-rater agreement of the three writing raters reached 0.780, the two clause counters’ reached 0.831, and the reliability of the two error counters reached 0.896 while the intra-rater reliability coefficients were as follows: those for the three writing raters were 0.817, 0.854, and 0.855; those for the two clause counters were 0.931 and 0.949; those for the two error counters were 0.983 and 0.959.

Statistical procedures were used to analyze the data collected. For the students’ ability to correct errors, simple percentages of errors were calculated to see if the percentage of the participants’ errors corrected accurately increased after a period of treatment. For fluency, the variable of words per clause length was selected as a measuring tool, while for accuracy, errors per clause were chosen. As to the global writing quality, the holistic rating data were computed. For comparison between the EG and CG, an independent samples t-test was carried out; for comparison of the results between pre- and post-tests, a paired samples t-test was carried out. SPSS Version 13.0 for Windows was used for all statistical work.

To measure the student’s ability to self-edit errors, this study followed Ferris et al. (2000) in trying to find out to what extent students can successfully edit the errors marked by the teacher.

The measurement of writing fluency and accuracy in previous studies can generally be categorized into two types: frequencies and ratios. Research reveals that the ratios are much more successful than frequencies in indicating language development. The best measures of fluency ratios seem to be T-unit length, error-free T-unit length, and clause length. These three measures consistently increased in a linear relationship to proficiency across studies, regardless of task, target language, significance of the results, or how quality was defined (Wolfe-Quintero, et al., 1998: 29). The accuracy measures that were significantly related to short-term change and holistic judgments across a range of levels and within intact classes were two accuracy ratio measures: error-free T-unit and errors per T-unit as indicated by Wolfe-Quintero, et al. (1998: 119).

For two reasons in this study, number of words per clause and number of errors per clause were selected for measuring fluency and accuracy respectively instead of number of words per T-unit and number of errors per T-unit. For one thing, identification of a clause is straightforward while that of a T-unit involves the classification of main clauses and subordinate clauses, which may cause error. For another, T-unit has been criticized because it contains subordination but not coordination as part of its definition, thus obscuring inappropriate coordination by separating them into different T-units (Barbovi-Harlig, 1992). As a result, Ishikawa (1995) suggests that the clause may be a better production unit for tapping into beginning level writing because as a smaller unit than T-unit, it provides a smaller context for examining language growth. Considering the participants’ English
writing level in our study, clause would be more appropriate for analysis.

For the measurement of a text’s overall quality in this study, holistic scales were chosen because it was relative easy to find well-trained CET 4 writing raters. All of the 186 compositions of the participants were rated on a 15-point scale according to the scoring criteria adapted from CET4 writing.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Findings

Research findings included four aspects: self-editing ability, accuracy, fluency and writing quality. For each aspect, both pre- and post-tests, the EG and CG were compared to find any change due to the treatment effects. The pre- and post-tests results of the EG and CG are listed respectively in both descriptive statistics and paired samples t-test statistics in Table 1.

Table 1. The pre- & post-tests comparison with paired t-test (EG & CG)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-editing ability</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>.5722</td>
<td>.8123</td>
<td>−5.679</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.6767</td>
<td>.6655</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>.20555</td>
<td>.20879</td>
<td>−3.294</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.7730</td>
<td>.7252</td>
<td>−2.864</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>.6716</td>
<td>.5476</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.32105</td>
<td>.34854</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>.31887</td>
<td>.37903</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.32105</td>
<td>.34854</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>7.5188</td>
<td>8.5053</td>
<td>1.735</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>7.7259</td>
<td>8.7901</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>1.41349</td>
<td>1.51919</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.96526</td>
<td>1.62051</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>5.7375</td>
<td>7.2458</td>
<td>−3.558</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>5.4979</td>
<td>6.3979</td>
<td>−2.436</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>2.24069</td>
<td>1.89927</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.70581</td>
<td>1.87286</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that the EG significantly improved in three of the four aspects while the CG significantly improved in two (writing accuracy and quality) 12 weeks after the beginning of the study. With self-editing ability, only the EG showed significant positive change. The differences between the EG and CG merit further exploration.

The descriptive statistics and inferential statistics between the EG and CG before and after the treatment are listed below to further test if such effects can be attributed to EC in this experiment.

Table 2. EG & CG comparison with independent t-test (pre- & post-tests)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-editing ability</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>.5722</td>
<td>.6767</td>
<td>−2.347</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.8123</td>
<td>.6655</td>
<td>3.185</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>.20555</td>
<td>.22799</td>
<td>−.589</td>
<td>.558</td>
<td>.5476</td>
<td>.7252</td>
<td>−.884</td>
<td>.379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Means</td>
<td>.6716</td>
<td>.7730</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.37903</td>
<td>.34854</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>.31887</td>
<td>.32105</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.37903</td>
<td>.34854</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows that before treatment, no significant difference was found between the EG and CG in writing fluency, accuracy and quality, but the CG had a significantly superior self-editing ability than the EG. However, after the treatment, the EG significantly outperformed the CG in self-editing ability, writing accuracy and quality. The only result that showed no difference before and after experiment was writing fluency.

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that the EG improved more overtime than the CG. The EC strategy used by teachers in writing instruction was helpful for the students to self-edit their essays.

The comparison of the EG and CG in writing quality shows that before treatment, the two groups had no significant difference, but after treatment, although both groups had made some improvement, the EG’s writing quality was significantly higher. These statistical results show that accuracy was related to writing quality. It can be argued that the cognitive investment of editing one’s text after receiving error feedback is likely a necessary, or at least helpful, step on the road to longer term improvement in accuracy, especially to those Chinese language learners who take English as a foreign language.

### 4.2 Discussions

#### 4.2.1 The self-editing ability

The results of this study demonstrate that the students’ self-editing ability improved significantly over 12 weeks with the practice of EC. This confirms the findings in Fathman and Whalley (1990), Frantzen & Rissell (1987), and Ferris et al, (2000). The students from CG in the present study (see Table 3) made a lot of grammar errors—an average of 12.67 errors in a 156.3-word text, or nearly 1 error for every 10 words. Without feedback, CG was able to correct only about 8.0 out of the 12.67 errors on average. For the EG, in contrast, they had made quite fewer errors after treatment and they were also likely to correct an average of 8.0 out of the average 10 errors. This comparison shows that EC not only has an immediate effect on the revision of the same essay, but also had a delayed effect on the following essay and even later EC practice.
Table 3. The statistics of words, errors and errors corrected for EG and CG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EG</th>
<th></th>
<th>CG</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ws/E</td>
<td>Ers/E</td>
<td>Ers Corr/E</td>
<td>Ws/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave</td>
<td>128.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>169.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E refers to Essay; Ws refers to Words; Ers refers to Errors; Ers Corr refers to Errors Corrected.

4.2.2 Writing fluency

Both groups showed increased fluency over 12 weeks, and there was no significant difference between the two groups. This result was similar to that of the study by Jean Chandler (2000). But Chandler’s results were derived from a small sample of 30 ESL students, no reliabilities were reported and in particular, the fluency was measured with the amount of writing time reported by students themselves. Such self-report might not be accurate (e.g., one student may have included thinking time while another may have counted only drafting time). Similar results were also found in Robb et al. (1986) and Lizotte (2001), but since neither study included a CG, it was hard to justify their research findings.

Neither Lalande’s (1982) nor Frantzen’s (1995) studies found any significant improvement in written fluency over one semester. Semke (1984) even found a negative effect on fluency. Chandler (2000) attributed the findings of these three studies partly to the quantity of writing practice. The present study contradicts Truscott’s (1999: 117) claim that “correction leads students to shorten and simplify their writing to avoid being corrected, thereby reducing their opportunities to practice writing and to experiment with new forms”. As is shown in Table 5, the average number of words per essay in the EG increased from 128.7 to 169.2, similar to the CG’s increase from 115 to 156.3.

4.2.3 Writing accuracy

This study found that (1) the EG had an obviously higher accuracy rate than the CG at the end of the treatment; (2) the EG had improved in accuracy while the CG had not. With regard to error feedback versus no error feedback, only four studies clearly address the issue. Two of them (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Kepner, 1991) reported positive effects of EC, similar to the findings of this study; and two reported negative effects (Polio et al., 1998; Truscott & Hsu, 2008).

Fathman & Whalley’s results demonstrate a statistically significant advantage in accuracy for the two groups who received error feedback over the two groups that did not (the content-only group and the no-feedback group). However, since the study did not last long, it is not clear whether the advantage could hold over a longer period of time and result in long-term improvement in accuracy. Kepner’s study provides longitudinal evidence that EC leads to decrease in the number of errors. However, the differences he found were not statistically significant, and other flaws with the design and analysis
Polio et al. presented findings that ruled out any advantage for EC. However, although their study was carefully designed and executed, a single 7-week study with 65 participants can hardly be construed as an overwhelming body of evidence against EC in writing, and in fact, the authors themselves warn readers against jumping to that conclusion. Truscott and Hsu studied the accuracy issue on the first and the consecutive compositions. They found that the EG enjoyed better accuracy than the CG on the first composition, but in the next composition, no difference was spotted between the EG and CG. They then drew the conclusion that EC had no prolonged effect on writing accuracy. What was missing in their study was the prolonged effects of repeated error treatment.

The present study extended the treatment period, and its findings support the claim made in the first two studies. As far as fluency is concerned, the study shows that the EG made no less progress than the CG. In other words, the increase in accuracy by the EG was not accompanied by a decline in fluency over the semester. Unlike Truscott’s claim (1999: 117), the pursuing of writing accuracy doesn’t block the development of fluency; it does not lead learners to “shorten and simplify their writing”.

4.2.4 Writing quality
In this study, we found that the reduction in the error rate translated positively into a measurable improvement in writing quality as assessed by holistic ratings. This does not support the claim that “students were making fewer errors and writing more quickly because their writing was less complex or otherwise of lower quality at the end of the semester than it had been at the beginning” (Truscott, 1999).

Chandler (2000) also used holistic ratings as a measure for students’ overall quality of writing. In his study, no significant change was found in holistic ratings over the semester, though the ratings for the final assignment were slightly higher than those for the first.

As to this study, the significant difference in quality between the EG and CG might be attributed to the fact that for Chinese foreign language learners, accuracy occupies a greater gravity in overall writing quality. The single improvement in accuracy might directly result in the higher holistic rating scores.

5. Conclusions
This study addresses the fundamental issue of EC: Does EC help language learners? It finds that the Chinese college English learners who received error feedback improved in ability of self-editing their essays, writing accuracy and overall writing quality. This finding justifies the practice of teacher-conducted error feedback. It shows that EC plays a positive role in the self-monitoring of language production, including the conscious editing of writing.

However, this finding should not be generalized without taking into consideration the limitations of this study. First of all, although the teachers in this study were aware of the importance of error feedback in helping students improve the accuracy of their writing in the long run, few of them tried to empower the students through error feedback. For instance, very few teachers were using error frequency charts or error logs to help students...
become more aware of their own error patterns and take greater responsibility for their own improvement. As Ferris & Helt (2000) argue, it is important for error feedback to be used together with grammar instruction and strategy training so that students will learn to edit their own writing independently.

Another important question is about the impact of required revision on student gains in accuracy. L2 writing research, including this study, suggests that giving students time to revise and holding them accountable for doing so will help them to attend better to the feedback they receive (Ferris, 1997; James, 2001). Thus it is hard to assess the separate effects of the feedback, the revision, or the combination of both treatments. It is important to qualify any improvement in accuracy by noting that it is unclear whether this improvement should be attributed to error correction or revision or error correction plus revision.

In addition, the sample size was still relatively small and the participants were all drawn from a single university. More similar experiments are required in order to support the efficacy of error correction. The experiment period may not be long enough as to the study of language acquisition issues. We have no idea whether the advantages of EC would hold over a longer period of time and would result in long-term improvement in accuracy.

Finally, this study did not investigate the students’ perception of error correction. As Ferris (2001) pointed out:

Students are likely to attend to and appreciate feedback on their errors, and this may motivate them both to make corrections and to work harder on improving their writing. The lack of such feedback may lead to anxiety or resentment, which could decrease motivation and lower confidence in their teachers.

There is also the opposite argument, holding that too much negative feedback may frustrate language learners, especially when they see their time-consuming compositions covered with red marks. How do Chinese foreign language learners react to error correction? This issue requires further research.

References


The Justification of Teacher-guided Error Correction of Chinese College Students’ English Writing


WANG Weihong & DONG Yuanxing


(Copy editing: Linell Davis)