

Japanese EFL Writers' Perceptions of the Effects of Direct and Indirect WCF on Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The present study evaluated Japanese EFL writers' perceptions of the effects of direct and indirect written corrective feedback (WCF) on their acquisition of grammatical forms. Participants were 42 first-year English majors at a Japanese university, and their perception of various features of direct and indirect corrective feedback was fathomed through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey. The results showed that all participants appreciated provision of indirect WCF which engaged them in cognitive processing and helped them acquire grammatical forms but, at the same time, indicated that direct correction was an indispensable instrument for identifying complex structures quickly and accurately. The participants had a tendency to regard writing assignments as tasks to finish, rather than as a trial-and-error process for language acquisition, but there was evidence that the most attentive or dedicated learners started assuming an increasingly positive attitude toward drafting during the semester.

Introduction

The present study evaluates Japanese EFL writers' perceptions of the effects of direct and indirect written corrective feedback (WCF) on their acquisition of grammatical forms. Earlier researchers have proposed that indirect WCF that makes L2 learners struggle to recognize, and repair, their own errors tends to deepen their noticing and facilitate their acquisition of grammatical forms (Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007). Learners pay close attention to the target form and notice the gaps in their interlanguage, and cognitive processing involved in this process is believed to have a positive effect on language acquisition. This position is in accord with the major tenet of focus-on-form instruction, which is intended to draw learners' attention to target linguistic forms during communicative language activities, as opposed to the focus-on-forms treatment that directly presents isolated target forms (Long, 1991; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998). However, there has also been evidence that lower-proficiency students sometimes benefit from direct WCF (Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sheen, 2007; Ferris, 2011). The present study explores both the positive and negative features of direct and indirect WCF from EFL learners' perspective based on qualitative data drawn from a group of Japanese university students. The obtained data are likely to help EFL writing teachers prepare

lesson plans that match their students' needs and preferences.

Participants were 42 first-year students who majored in English linguistics and literature at a private Japanese university. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews ($n=10$) and a questionnaire survey ($n=42$). A close analysis of EFL learners' preference for either direct or indirect WCF is an important foundation for future studies on how WCF might influence EFL writers' acquisition of grammatical forms or what error type is more amenable to direct or indirect feedback. In addition to the participants' general preference for either direct or indirect WCF, the interviews probed their perceptions of positive and negative features of different types of indirect feedback (e.g., indirect feedback using error codes, provision of reformulated phrases or sentences, metalinguistic explanations, and orthographic enhancement).

The effectiveness of direct error correction or different types of indirect feedback may also depend on the skill components of L2 writing (e.g., grammar, lexis, paragraph construction devices, and mechanics). For example, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) indicated that explicit indirect WCF was more effective for the acquisition of syntactic rules (the simple past tense or the definite article) than for the acquisition of lexical items (prepositions). On the other hand, Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken's (2012) study showed that direct correction was more effective for the acquisition of syntactic forms whereas indirect WCF was better for non-syntactic items including lexis. Thus, the effectiveness of direct or indirect feedback must be further analyzed in reference to target grammatical forms as well. The learners may prefer different forms of feedback for different grammatical forms.

Another point that deserves special attention is related to learners' L2 proficiencies and learning experiences. As mentioned above, although indirect corrective feedback induces cognitive processing, learners who are struggling with basic grammatical forms or do not have enough lexical knowledge may experience difficulties when responding to indirect feedback and thus react to either direct or indirect feedback in their unique ways. The present study focused on a local EFL classroom situation involving a group of first-year English majors and did not aim for generalization in the first place. However, the results, when compared with the findings from other studies with different learner groups of higher or lower English proficiencies, can contribute to better understanding of the overall effects of WCF on Japanese EFL writers' acquisition of grammatical forms.

Literature Review

Direct Error Correction or Indirect Feedback

This section reviews the studies in support of indirect correction and those in support of direct correction. Various functions of either type of written feedback are reviewed. Earlier studies investigating the effects of direct and indirect WCF on language acquisition

produced mixed results. Many studies indicated that indirect feedback, which guided learners to find and correct their own errors, was more effective, whereas some showed that direct feedback was more effective. Others indicated that indirect and direct feedback helped to improve different aspects of L2 writing. It must also be noticed that the use of an error coding system and the provision of metalinguistic explanations—two major types of indirect WCF—are likely to serve different purposes.

Chandler (2003) indicated that direct error correction had its advantage over the description of error types. Chandler engaged 36 ESL students in the United States in a task of autobiography writing and compared the effects of direct correction, description of error types, and underlining. The results showed that direct correction helped to improve the participants' accuracy in a following writing assignment more significantly than the error-type description. Learners also seemed to receive less discouragement from underlining (i.e., a simpler form of indirect WCF) than from error type description.

However, many studies have indicated that indirect WCF is more effective. Hendrickson (1978) proposed that indirect feedback that guided them to notice their own linguistic problems had a greater long-term effect on language acquisition by summarizing the earlier researchers' observations and theories. Then, Lalande's (1982) study, involving a group of intermediate German-as-a-Foreign-Language students at a US university, showed that indirect WCF was more effective than direct WCF. The group that received indirect WCF using error codes gained greater accuracy than the group that received direct error correction in the tasks of writing short essays.

Ferris and Roberts (2001) compared the effects of (a) underlining and indication of error types using codes and (b) underlining only on L2 writers' abilities to self-edit their grammatical errors. They asked two experimental groups and a control group that received no feedback to write a 50-minute diagnostic essay and analyzed their self-edited essays to show that the codes group and the underlining group corrected a significantly greater percentage of errors in their own essays than the no-feedback group, although there was no significant difference between the two feedback groups.

Ferris (2006) evaluated WCF's long-term and short-term influence on ESL students' essay-writing by analyzing the students' responses to each category of feedback. The participants, 92 ESL students at a US university, submitted three drafts for each of the four writing assignments, and the teachers provided content-based feedback on the first drafts and form-focused feedback on the second drafts using codes that indicated 15 error categories. The second and third drafts for each writing assignment were compared to determine the students' successful editing. The second drafts for the first and fourth writing assignments were compared to determine the effects of form-focused feedback on the students' acquisition of grammatical forms. The results showed that indirect form-focused feedback enabled the students to repair their errors on new drafts 80% of the time, indicating that indirect WCF

had a positive short-term effect. The students also made significantly fewer errors in their fourth essays than in the first essays, evidencing a positive long-term effect.

An alternative form of WCF is provision of reformulated phrases or sentences, which requires L2 writers to compare their own sentences with the provided model forms and analyze their own errors. Qi and Lapkin (2001) analyzed the processes in which two Chinese ESL learners of different English proficiencies composed an L2 text in response to a picture prompt in English and compared their drafts with a reformulated version prepared by a native speaker. Later, the participants were asked to revise their drafts, a task that they had not been informed of in advance. Language-related episodes extracted from the think-aloud protocols showed that the participants deepened their noticing in the process of struggling to recognize, and find solutions to, the linguistic problems in their writing. The results also showed that the higher-proficiency learner, who was more capable of autonomously solving the noticed problems, benefited more from the writing and feedback-processing tasks.

Sachs and Polio (2007) also compared the effects of direct correction and provision of reformulations on ESL students' ability to revise their writings. In the first part of their study, the participants ($N=15$) wrote a story in response to a series of pictures, received direct corrections, and, later, revised their writing with no access to the corrected version during the first week; during the next week, they received reformulated sentences to compare their own writings with. The within-subjects comparison showed that the participants used grammatical forms (e.g., choice of prepositions, gerund vs. infinitive, subject-verb agreement, verb formation) more accurately in the error correction condition than in the reformation condition. However, in their follow-up study with a greater number of participants ($N=54$), Sachs and Polio conducted a between-subjects comparison among three experimental groups (i.e., receiving direct correction, receiving reformulation, reformulation plus think-aloud treatments) and a control group. The results showed that the group that received the reformulation plus think-aloud treatment, which was intended to induce a higher level of awareness, outperformed the control group.

Another major form of indirect WCF, which has been as commonly utilized as an error coding system, is metalinguistic explanation. Sheen (2007) evaluated the effects of (a) direct correction with metalinguistic feedback and (b) direct correction only on the acquisition of the English articles. Participants were 91 ESL students at a US language program. She administered a speeded dictation test, a writing test, and an error correction test to the two experimental groups and a no-feedback group. The comparison between the three groups' means at pretest, immediate posttest, and delayed posttest indicated that the metalinguistic feedback contributed to learners' long-term acquisition of the target form. The study also showed that participants with high aptitude for language analysis tended to benefit more from metalinguistic feedback.

Bitchener and Knoch (2009) evaluated the effects of metalinguistic explanation on the acquisition of the English definite and indefinite articles, involving ESL students in New Zealand. They compared the effectiveness of (a) written meta-linguistic explanation and an oral form-focused review of it, (b) written meta-linguistic explanation, or (c) error circling; all of the three experimental groups outperformed the control group, but there was no significant difference between three groups. On the other hand, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) evaluated the effectiveness of the same three types of WCF again and showed that the groups that received written metalinguistic explanation with or without an oral form-focused review achieved significantly greater accuracy than error circling.

Shintani and Ellis (2013) compared the effects of direct corrective feedback and metalinguistic explanation on ESL learners' accurate use of the English indefinite article and indicated that metalinguistic explanation was more effective than direct feedback. A group of low-intermediate ESL students ($N=49$) in the United States were divided into two experimental group (receiving either metalinguistic feedback or direct correction) and one control group (receiving no feedback) and engaged them in a written picture-description task. The two experimental groups subsequently produced two new pieces of writing. The results showed that only the metalinguistic group outperformed the control group in accuracy, whereas their accurate use was not maintained until the delayed writing task two weeks later. Shintani and Ellis's interpretation was that direct corrective feedback had no effect on L2 learners' acquisition of the indefinite article at all, and metalinguistic explanation had a positive effect on their explicit knowledge of the target form but had no effect on their implicit knowledge.

Aside from the effectiveness of the provision of error codes or metalinguistic explanations, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) proposed that teacher-student conference can play a major supporting role when combined with other types of WCF. Bitchener et al. engaged 53 adult migrant students in New Zealand in four 250-word writing tasks during a 12-week experimental period and compared the effects of (a) explicit WCF (indication of ungrammatical parts and provision of metalinguistic explanations immediately after the indicated ungrammatical parts) on grammatical errors and student-teacher individual conferences, (b) explicit WCF only and (c) no-feedback treatment on the participants' abilities to use three different grammatical rules (prepositions, the simple past tense, and the definite article). The results showed that the explicit feedback with individual conferences had a significantly positive effect on their accuracy with the definite article and the past tense, which were rule-governed linguistic features, whereas prepositions were not equally amenable to the same treatment.

Finally, it is noteworthy that direct and indirect WCF can play different roles in facilitating their language learning. Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) compared the effects of direct and indirect WCF on L2 Dutch learners' abilities to edit their drafts and

to write accurately on a new topic. Participants, 268 secondary school students learning Dutch as their second language, wrote about the biological features of an insect in about 120 words. They were divided into Experimental Group 1 that received direct correction, Experimental Group 2 that received indirect corrective feedback using an error coding system, Control Group 1 that received no CF and self-edited their writings, and Control Group 2 that received no CF and engaged in a completely new writing task. The study produced evidence that direct correction contributed more to the participants' gains in syntactic accuracy (e.g., abilities to produce syntactically correct forms involving articles, inflections, word order), and indirect CF resulted in improving non-syntactic accuracy gains (e.g., related to lexis, pragmatics, orthography). Interestingly, this is contrasted with Bitchener et al.'s (2005) study that indicated that indirect WCF providing brief in-text comments contributed to the acquisition of rule-governed syntactic forms.

From the perspective of learner psychology, indirect WCF using codes heightened L2 writers' motivation for writing and revising. The questionnaire section of Ferris and Roberts' (2001) study indicated that the most popular error correction technique was for the teacher to mark and label errors with codes. The participants in Chandler's (2003) study also felt that they learned more from self-correction based on the descriptions of error types.

Overall, the effects of direct error correction, indirect correction using codes, and metalinguistic explanations seemed to serve different functions in different learning contexts or in combination with different types of feedback. There has also been evidence that learners with higher L2 proficiencies or aptitudes tend to utilize indirect feedback more efficiently and that some grammatical forms are more amenable to either direct or indirect feedback. The purpose of the present study is to probe the participants' psychological reactions to WCF in detail in light of the type of feedback, proficiency, and target grammatical form through in-depth interviews and a questionnaire survey.

Research Questions

The following three research questions guided this study.

Research Question 1: Do Japanese EFL students generally perceive direct error correction to be more effective and useful than indirect WCF, or do they perceive indirect WCF as more effective?

Research Question 2: What do Japanese EFL students perceive to be the positive and negative features of indirect WCF?

Research Question 3: What do Japanese EFL students perceive to be the positive and negative features of direct error correction?

There was no a priori hypothesis for any of the research questions proposed.

Method

The interview and questionnaire survey data for the present study were collected from the same group of students who participated in this author's (Ogawa, 2017) earlier study. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the participants, the instructional treatment, and part of the instrumentation and procedure for data collection and analysis overlap those in the preceding paper. Some of the detailed descriptions, as well as the rationale for the use of semi-structured interview and narrative analysis, are not included in the present paper.

Research Site and Participants

The present project is an action research study to identify ways to improve the quality of an EFL course at a Japanese university in Tokyo. It is beyond the scope and nature of this study to generalize beyond its boundary. The teacher was the researcher himself, and 43 first-year students enrolled in the reading and writing course in the fall of 2014 ($n=25$) or in the spring of 2015 ($n=18$) participated in the research project. The students were all female and majored in English language and literature. The mean of the 2014 group's TOEIC scores was 519.80 ($SD=14.92$), and that of the 2015 group's scores was 393.06 ($SD=68.09$).

Forty-two of the 43 participants responded to a questionnaire survey, and 10 (six in 2014 and four in 2015) voluntarily participated in interview sessions. The drafts that the participants submitted during the course work were also analyzed as additional data to determine their perceptions of, and response to, the provided written feedback.

Instructional Procedure

The participants submitted three drafts for each of the four writing assignments during the semester, that is, after receiving the teacher's explanations about the paragraph structure for a new rhetorical pattern and engaging in controlled writing exercises. Regarding the first two writing assignments for the 2014 group, the teacher provided content-based feedback and paragraph-structure feedback on the first draft and provided form-focused feedback on the second draft, using error codes (e.g., *WW* for wrong word, *art* for articles). As for the third and fourth writing tasks, however, the teacher modified his policy and provided some form-focused feedback, as well as content-based feedback, on the first draft and offered additional form feedback on the second draft. This was because the interviewees in 2014 expressed their preference for continual provision of form feedback. On the third draft, the teacher corrected all the remaining grammatical errors directly and offered an overall comment on each participant's writing. The grades were given only on the last draft based on the quality of the final product and the participants' efforts in the revising processes.

Instrumentation and Procedure for Data Collection

Interview design and procedure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how the participants perceived, or reacted to, teacher written feedback (see Mishler (1986) and Seidman (2006) for research interviewing). The interviewer encouraged the informants to recount their personal language-learning experiences, incidents, or episodes in and outside of the course and tried to find commonalities and differences within or between informants. The interviews were conducted in Japanese so that the participants would feel relaxed and freely describe their beliefs about positive and negative aspects of WCF and recount their experiences.

The researcher conducted all the interviews by himself and interviewed one participant at a time in his office, and all interviews were audiotaped from the beginning to the end for later transcription. Each interview session took about 20 minutes, and each participant was interviewed twice. The first-round interviews were administered at a half-way point during the semester. Broad questions had been prepared concerning their L2 writing strategies, their perception of the roles of written feedback, and the type or amount of feedback they preferred to receive. The second interviews were conducted at the end of the semester to ask follow-up questions regarding the major issues brought up in the first interviews and the participants' reflections on their experiences during the semester.

Questionnaire survey. A questionnaire survey was administered at the last class session to evaluate all the participants' perceptions of WCF. One student was absent, and the *N*-size was reduced to 42.

The participants were, first, asked to indicate their preference for receiving either form-focused feedback or content-based feedback on the answer sheet; they were allowed to choose both alternatives. Those who indicated their desire for form feedback were further asked to indicate (a) the error categories on which they wanted feedback (e.g., syntax, lexical items or phrases, paragraph construction devices, spelling, mechanics), (b) their preference for focused or unfocused feedback (e.g., all errors, one major target form, two or three error types per essay) and (c) the particular types of direct or indirect corrective feedback they preferred (e.g., direct error correction, use of error codes, circling or underlining, indication of the number of errors per page, metalinguistic explanation, provision of reformulated samples). Multiple answers were permitted. The participants who indicated their desire for content-based feedback were further asked to specify whether they preferred: (a) only content feedback, (b) both content and form feedback, (c) brief comments that evidenced that the teacher had read their essays and (d) positive comments that encouraged them to write more. Their responses to the survey questions were designed to be compared with the interviewees' comments, although only the major findings that resonated, or were contrasted, with the interview results are summarized and reported in the Results section.

Writing sample. The researcher/teacher tracked the participants' self-corrections from Draft 1 to Draft 2 or from Draft 2 to Draft 3, i.e., in response to his indirect WCF using codes. The types of correction (form, content, and paragraph) and the participants' response (successful revision, unsuccessful revision, and no response) were cross-tabulated, and any interesting characteristics observed in the way they corrected their own errors were recorded as supplementary data for qualitative analysis.

Instrumentation and Procedure for Data Analysis

Transcription. All taped interviews were first transcribed verbatim and were later edited to the extent that the meanings of messages were not affected. Researchers can choose to either transcribe an interview verbatim or to edit it to make it more readable depending on the purpose and nature of their research (Kvale, 1996). In the present study, the words and sentences that the participants used were basically preserved, but unnecessary or nonstandard linguistic features, such as interjections, false starts, colloquial sentence endings, and unimportant repetitions, were deleted from the quoted texts in order not to distract the readers' attention.

Narrative analysis. In order to understand learners' perceptions in depth, narrative analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Casanave, 2005) was conducted. Narrative parts were extracted from the transcripts and analyzed in order to understand learners' experiences and perceptions and to find commonalities among different observations and statements within or between the participants (Bruner, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1997). Some interviewees' observations are quoted in the Results section, using pseudonyms, to relate their interesting narratives to their personal backgrounds and idiosyncrasies.

Analysis of non-narrative data. Sentence-level statements that did not constitute stories were used to support or bridge the narrative data, using a traditional system for coding and categorizing interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A list of codes originally prepared included: (a) positive and negative aspects of direct WCF, (b) positive and negative aspects of indirect WCF, (c) use of error codes and (d) metalinguistic explanation. Meaningful ideas, facts, and keywords were marked in the transcripts and tentatively labeled using provisional codes. While examining the data, the researcher continually re-categorized the participants' comments using additional codes to cluster similar facts and ideas for analysis and interpretation.

Results

Preference for Direct or Indirect WCF

The first research purpose was to fathom Japanese EFL writers' overall preference for

either direct WCF or indirect WCF. The participants' reactions were mixed. Whereas all interviewees ($n=10$) agreed that indirect WCF involved them in cognitive processing which contributed to language acquisition, some indicated that direct error correction served some practical purposes as well: i.e., to help learners identify their errors accurately. The questionnaire survey ($N=42$) indicated that the participants were not overwhelmingly in favor of either direct or indirect WCF. Twenty-five perceived direct error correction as the more effective or useful, and 20 preferred indirect feedback; 11 of the latter further indicated their preference for the use of codes. (Multiple answers were permitted.) Four preferred simple orthographic enhancement such as underlining or circling. Two preferred the provision of a reformulated structure without any code or explanation about the error type. No participants indicated their desire for either the indication of the number of errors per page or elaborate metalinguistic explanations in end notes. In other words, they generally preferred the types of feedback that provided enough information but were not too elaborate. Their perceptions of positive or negative features of either mode of feedback are described in greater detail below.

Perceptions of Indirect WCF

Positive features of indirect WCF. In the EFL course where the present research study was conducted, the major mode of feedback that the teacher used was indirect WCF using error codes, although he provided metalinguistic explanations whenever he found it appropriate and directly corrected the grammatical errors on the last drafts for each writing assignment or, occasionally, on second drafts when he decided that the participants would never be able to correct certain errors by themselves. Chihiro, Hanako, Satsuki, Megumi, Izumi, and Yukiko emphasized that the teacher's policy of indicating the ungrammatical parts and using codes to guide them to correct their own errors was useful and appropriate. All of the other interviewees also concurred, in one way or another, on the effectiveness of the use of a coding system.

花子：今やっている通り，線を引いて，形容詞が間違っているとかが抜けているとかの方が，今のやり方で大丈夫だと思います。

Hanako: Just like you're doing it now, I think it's good to underline [the ungrammatical parts] and indicate that [for example] an adjective is missing. (Hanako Interview 1)

さつき：ヒントを出してもらった方が自分でも直せるし，間違っているところに気づけるかなと思います。

Satsuki: If you give me a hint, then, I'll notice what is wrong and can correct it myself. (Satsuki Interview 1)

千尋：全部直す方法じゃなくって、間違っているところに下線とか引いて、ここが、あの、先生みたいなやり方。

小川：コードが付いてる方が良いですか。

千尋：そうです。

Chihiro: Instead of correcting the errors completely, [I think it's better] to underline the ungrammatical parts and indicate this is [problematic], just like you're doing.

Ogawa: Do you think the use of codes is helpful?

Chihiro: Yes, I do. (Chihiro Interview 1)

Some interviewees explicitly indicated that the use of codes was more useful and effective than mere orthographic enhancement or elaborate metalinguistic explanation. Yuno, for instance, observed that using a very simple form of indirect WCF was problematic and emphasized the useful function of a coding system. She felt that, if the teacher simply underlined or circled ungrammatical parts or indicated the number of errors she made per page, she could not identify her own errors and might even delete or change some phrases that were correctly composed in her earlier drafts.

小川：もっと極端な場合、間違っているところに下線だけ引いておくとかですね、このページの中に何個間違いがありますって書いてあって、あと自分で考えるというタイプもあるんですけども。

ゆの：うーん何個っていうところだと、なんか他の余計なところとか、ここいらないかもしれないって、最初の物を削ってしまったり私はしてしまうので、あの、特定してもらった方がいいです。

O: As an extreme case [of indirect feedback], the teacher may simply underline the ungrammatical parts in each student's writing or indicate how many errors she's made on that page, guiding the student to try to find out [about the characteristics of the errors] on her own.

Yuno: Well, if I'm only told the number of errors I've made, I may end up making unnecessary changes or deleting some parts in the original text, so I'd appreciate the teacher's specifying the location and type of an error. (Yuno Interview 1)

The coding system was also more popular than metalinguistic explanations. Although Megumi acknowledged that the explanation of major error types at the end of her paragraph or essay was helpful in its own way, she preferred the teacher to write a code or brief comment in the margin near the location of each error.

恵：マークが付いていて自分で直す方がいいと思います。巻末に書いてあると、いいとは思うんですけど、でもその都度なんかマークがあって、直していく方が。

Megumi: I think it's good to have the errors marked [by the teacher] and correct those errors ourselves. The descriptions [of error types] at the end of the essay would be

helpful, too, but I think it's more effective if we find [a code or brief comment] at the location of each error and correct one error at a time. (Megumi Interview 1)

If learners make the same type of error repeatedly, it may be more efficient to describe the rule so that they can remember the rule and correct other errors of the same kind by themselves. However, the participants in the present study were appreciative of the more easily accessible or understandable forms of indirect WCF, rather than metalinguistic descriptions summarizing the characteristic features of their linguistic problems. In other words, the learners liked an arrangement to involve them in cognitive processing but, at the same time, needed the teacher's help for identifying the errors quickly, so that they would not have to spend an excessively large amount of time and energy on editing tasks. Overall, the learners preferred clearly noticeable or understandable feedback to detailed descriptions of grammatical rules.

Negative features of indirect WCF. However, the provision of indirect WCF using codes brought a negative reaction from one interviewee. Hanako, who approved the teacher's policy of providing indirect feedback using codes, suggested that a complex coding system could entail a burden on L2 writers. She sometimes experienced difficulty remembering what error type each code indicated. The teacher had been aware of this problem beforehand and, thus, had taken time to explain the most frequently used codes when distributing a table of codes at the beginning of the semester and urged them to pay close attention to those particular items. He had also prepared a relatively short list, which did not exceed one page in length. That is, preemptive measures had been taken not to overwhelm the students with a number of symbols and definitions listed in the table. Nonetheless, Hanako could not fully utilize the provided table (e.g., not understanding that a triple underline below a letter in lower case indicated that the letter should be capitalized and that a double underline below a large letter suggested transformation into a small letter) and admitted that she had lost the handout by the time of her first interview. She preferred the teacher to describe the type of an error in phrases or short sentences, instead of labeling ungrammatical parts with codes.

花子：ただ、何が何を直して欲しいっていう意味なのか、例えば3本下線を引いてあったり2本下線引いてあったり、あれどっちだっけみたいな、例えばなっちゃうと思うので、その印に下にこういう意味だよって教えてくれた方がもしかしたら直しやすいー

小川：表を配ってるんですけど、表を一回。

花子：えっ、表、うそ。

小川：表を配ったんですけどね。(笑い)

花子：じゃ失くしたかなー

Hanako: But I sometimes didn't understand what kind of error each code meant. For example, I find a triple underline or a double underline below a letter and wonder which one indicates which error type. I might have been able to correct the error more easily if you'd written the error type underneath.

O: But I had once handed out a table of codes.

Hanako: What? Table? Is that so?

O: I did hand out a table (laughingly).

Hanako: Then, I might have lost it. (Hanako Interview 1)

In this case, she had not paid close attention to the provided information, whereas Izumi, another participant, stated that she could clearly understand what each code represented by consulting the distributed handout. Moreover, most students' drafts showed that they utilized the codes to find and correct their own errors without any trouble. Nonetheless, the clear implication is that the codes and definitions, which are meant to help learners, can impose a burden on some students if they need to search for the relevant code among a number of items in the list, and the requirement for keeping a list of codes at hand for repeated use itself might cause a problem to some learners.

To sum up, although most participants perceived indirect feedback as an effective form of WCF, if they cannot fully utilize the provided codes either because of their failure to pay attention or because of a complicated feedback system, the effective functions of indirect feedback may be impaired or ruined. Instead, direct feedback—or simpler indirect feedback (e.g., underlining)—can be more useful for certain learners.

Perceptions of Direct WCF

Positive features of direct WCF. While appreciating indirect WCF, the participants also perceived direct correction in red ink as very useful. However, their perception of the roles of direct WCF varied from person to person, and different learners reacted to, or utilized, direct correction differently.

Satsuki perceived direct error correction as useful particularly for the acquisition of complex sentence structures, which she believed to be crucial for the communication of messages. She felt that, whereas the absence of an indefinite article was not likely to affect the meanings, the grammatical structure of a complicated sentence (e.g., an SVOC sentence pattern, relative clauses, or hypothetical conditionals) could affect readability of her writing, and that she needed to learn to assemble such structures perfectly. As mentioned in the preceding section, Yuno indicated her preference for somewhat explicit indirect WCF rather than orthographic enhancement because, if she did not precisely understand what the problems were, she would never learn the target forms. Satsuki's desire for acquiring the target form accurately resonated with Yuno's perception of an understandable and useful

form of indirect feedback.

さつき：そういう時は簡単な *a* とかが入ってないとかは括弧だけにしておいて、ここ重要だなみたいなところは普通に直してあればいいかなと思います。

小川：重要なところを直接直してもらった方がいい？

さつき：はい。

Satsuki: In the case of minor errors, it's good enough for the teacher to indicate, for example, that *a* is missing by writing a pair of round brackets with empty space in between. But as for the important grammatical forms, I think it's better to correct them directly in the normal way.

O: You mean you prefer direct error correction on major grammatical forms?

Satsuki: Yes. (Satsuki Interview 1)

The fact Satsuki indicated she preferred to have errors fixed “in the normal way” implied that direct error correction was what she, and probably other Japanese EFL students, had received in most of the previous high-school or university composition courses.

Another major reason why the participants preferred direct error correction is that they wanted to finish the task of correcting all errors and having their final drafts ready for submission in a reasonably short time. Hanako's observation below shows that her priority was to finish her homework assignments, rather than to learn language through drafting.

花子：上達っていう面では、文章自体はベースがあって変わらないので、そこで直してもらったところを直す。自分でその、直すだけなので、上達というよりは、完成に近づけていくって—

小川：つまり、つまり編集ですね。

花子：ですね。

Hanako: Talking about improvement, the structures of the sentences that I originally wrote will remain unchanged; I just repair the errors pointed out or commented on. So, I'm just trying to polish the text to complete it, rather than learning more English.

O: In other words, you are editing your text.

Hanako: I think I am. (Hanako Interview 2)

Although Hanako had agreed, in a previous context, on the useful function of indirect WCF that induced cognitive processing, she clearly believed that it was not easy for her to acquire new forms permanently through the process of drafting based on teacher feedback. She personally acknowledged the limits to her language learning capacity. Her immediate goal of L2 writing was to complete her homework assignments, and the same feeling was shared by several other participants.

千尋：でも文法学習，意識は常にしながら，でもタスク，宿題としてって感じです。

小川：はい。なるほどね。学習の一環ではあるけども，やはりひとつずつ取り組む場合は—

千尋：ちゃんと提出目指してみたいなそういう感覚—

Chihiro: But, while being aware that I'm supposed to learn grammatical forms, I feel I tend to be writing to finish a task or homework assignment.

O: I see. Though it's part of a language learning process, when you take on each assignment—

Chihiro: I think I'm trying to make sure that my essay is ready for submission by the deadline. (Chihiro Interview 2)

Chihiro and Satsuki further indicated that they preferred the teacher to find and fix all errors in one draft. Such an observation provided additional evidence that they regarded all in-class or take-home writing activities as tasks to complete, rather than appreciating them as hands-on training to learn grammatical forms. Likewise, another participant named Megumi, who took one to two hours on each draft to produce a much lengthier writing than her classmates, stated that, once she had completed a draft using her computer, she would just print it out and have it ready for submission without bothering to further elaborate on important issues or polish the sentence/paragraph structures. Overall, to many of the participants, L2 writing practice was a real-life task that they wanted to finish so that they were ready to move on to other academic or non-academic activities.

Finally, some participants felt that direct correction could be more effectively utilized when combined with a different type of feedback: e.g., teacher-student conferences. For instance, Mei had entered the university on the high-school principal's recommendation and was required to take an English essay-writing test in place of an objective English test. In preparation for the essay writing test, she had personally received intensive training in paragraph-writing from her high-school teacher. Mei's high school teacher had corrected her errors directly but had done so in her presence so that the teacher and the student could negotiate the meanings and the appropriate forms to express them in context. Mei herself appreciated this combination of direct correction and interpersonal interactions with the teacher as a useful and effective approach. That is, although the teacher's direct error correction did not engage her in cognitive thinking through the use of error codes, the teacher-student interactions and negotiations served the same purpose.

Negative features of direct WCF. The notable weakness of direct WCF is that it can deprive learners of opportunities to discover grammatical rules: this weakness corresponds to the major strong feature of indirect WCF. Yukiko straightforwardly acknowledged that she tended to copy the repaired form onto a new draft mechanically after receiving direct error corrections. She observed that indirect feedback that induced cognitive thinking was

preferable to direct correction, reflecting on the way that the latter interfered with her learning.

由紀子：先に直してもらってもう一回作り直すっていうと、やっぱり写すだけっていう風になってしまうので、まあ自分で考えてやる方がいいと思います。

Yukiko: If we have our errors corrected on the first draft and turn in a new draft, we'll probably end up copying the correct forms the teacher has provided. So, I think it's better for us to think and correct our own errors. (Yukiko Interview)

Yukiko's observation was a clear-cut case that evidenced their awareness of the weakness of direct correction. However, not surprisingly, some participants expressed their confusion about the effective functions and ineffective sides of direct correction. For instance, Satsuki, who acknowledged the effectiveness of indirect WCF using a coding system, found herself in a dilemma between direct correction, which helped correct her errors accurately and swiftly, and provision of hints on her errors, which guided her to acquire target forms through a struggling process. Using accurate forms was her priority when producing texts to submit. Whereas she was a type of learner who explored new language-learning strategies for independent study (e.g., keeping a diary in English or translating a scene out of an English-language movie), she repeatedly switched back to the focus-on-forms-oriented strategy to make sure that each and every error was repaired—a habit that she might have developed in her high school years. Her interaction with the interviewer below shows how she was caught in the middle between her desire to have her major grammatical errors corrected and her willingness to make efforts to discover grammatical forms for language acquisition.

小川：間違っていると気づいて直す。そういった認知的な処理を通すことによって言語習得が促進されるって言われるんですけども、直接直したために、気づきがなくなってしまうってことは心配しないですか。

さつき：あ、ちょっとなんかその全部教えてもらっちゃうと、自分で考えないから、だめになっちゃうかなって思うんですけど [小川：はい] ああ、はい、思います。

小川：思うけど、直接直した方がいい？

さつき：はい。

小川：それはやっぱり確実性って問題ですか。それともそちらの方が手っ取り早いとかですね。

さつき：合ってる方がいいなって思います。

O: You notice and correct your own errors: they [i.e., some researchers] say that such cognitive processing facilitates language acquisition. Aren't you afraid that direct correction, in contrast, will keep you from noticing your own errors?

Satsuki: Uh, as a matter of fact, I think we probably won't try to think ourselves if we are taught everything, and it's not good. [O: Yes] Yes, I agree but...

O: But you still prefer direct correction.

Satsuki: Yes.

O: Is that because you want to make sure that everything is correct? Or is it because you can finish your task more quickly that way?

Satsuki: I want to make sure that my usage of English is correct. (Satsuki Interview 2)

As further evidence that substantial individual differences exist, Michiko's reaction was a unique and insightful case. When the researcher/interviewer asked her which type of feedback (i.e., direct error correction or indication of the location and error type using codes) she preferred, she indicated her preference for direct error correction, adding that she could fully utilize the teacher feedback without suffering any negative effects at all.

美智子：赤で直してもらうのと、正しい文を書いてもらうのが私はとても助かりますね。

小川：で、赤で直してもらうとですね、まあそのまま写してしまうので、人によっては自分で考えて自分のミス直す方がいいと言う人もいますけども、それに関してどう思いますか。

美智子：私は先生に一回直してもらってから、またそれを自分で、先生の文章と似たような文章を自分でどんどん書いていく人なので、私はそういうことはないです。

Michiko: I would appreciate the teacher's directly correcting my errors in red ink or providing reformulated forms.

O: If the teacher corrects errors directly, learners may tend to mechanically copy the corrected forms [on the next drafts], so some people prefer to think and correct their own errors. What do you think about this problem?

Michiko: In my case, even if I have an error directly corrected by the teacher, I'll try to use the repaired form over and over again in new pieces of writing, and I won't have any problem at all. (Michiko Interview 1)

In contrast with Yukiko who straightforwardly acknowledged that she might copy the corrected form onto a new draft, Michiko stated that she always committed herself to reflecting on the teacher's error corrections when working on new paragraphs or essays and, therefore, did not feel that direct error correction would prevent her from acquiring the forms for later use. She took careful note of the teacher's feedback and reviewed the provided comments and corrections before submitting new drafts. That is, even if direct feedback is unilaterally provided, as long as learners make voluntary efforts to utilize, or recycle, the teacher feedback in a productive way, the negative effect of direct correction might be controlled for. It is acknowledged that the degree to which Michiko recycled the teacher's lessons consistently, or how solidly she formulated her own grammatical rules, has yet to be confirmed. Nonetheless, her case provided evidence that some EFL students might utilize the passively provided feedback efficiently in a productive way.

Overall, the participants recognized the effectiveness of both direct and indirect WCF. However, the ways learners perceived the positive and negative aspects of direct feedback differed from person to person more greatly than their perceptions of indirect feedback.

Discussion

Research Question 1 was: Do Japanese EFL students generally perceive direct error correction to be more effective and useful than indirect WCF, or do they perceive indirect WCF as more effective? The participants' perceptions and reactions were mixed. All interviewees unanimously agreed that their efforts to recognize, and repair, their own errors based on indirect WCF were likely to result in long-term retention of target forms. Likewise, nearly half the survey respondents indicated their desire for indirect WCF. Their positive reaction to an arrangement for self-correction resonated with the proposal by Swain and Lapkin (1995), Qi and Lapkin (2001), and Sachs and Polio (2007): ESL writers who struggle to recognize, and find solutions to, the linguistic problems, deepen their noticing and thus acquire more accurate grammatical forms in L2 writing.

However, the interviewees also believed that provision of direct WCF clarified the target grammatical forms and helped them edit their texts swiftly and accurately, an important step for mastering complex grammatical structures. More than half of the questionnaire survey respondents indicated their preference for direct error correction. The participants' desire to process the feedback quickly is understandable from a logistic point of view because undergraduate students majoring in English language and literature must finish a substantial amount of homework for each of the many EFL and general education courses they take during the semester. They are bound by various real-life constraints. On the other hand, they do not want to leave any of their errors unrepaired, either.

The second and third research questions probed the participants' perception of more specific functions of different types of direct and indirect WCF.

Research Question 2 was: What do Japanese EFL students perceive to be the positive and negative features of indirect WCF? While acknowledging that cognitive processing was indispensable for language acquisition, several participants observed that they preferred the easily accessible, or understandable, types of indirect feedback: i.e., the use of codes or clipped in-text notes, which were written close to the location of an error and succinctly described the error type, as opposed to lengthy metalinguistic explanations. They did not wish to be burdened with an overly time-consuming rewriting process.

One negative reaction to indirect WCF concerned the complexity of a coding system. A long list of codes and definitions that the teacher provides can bewilder or overwhelm inexperienced L2 writers and impose a burden on those who have limited attentional resources. In other words, indirect WCF is useful only when students understand, and are able to fully utilize, the provided feedback. However, this problem can be, at least partially,

solved by the teacher's arrangement to make the coding system more learner-friendly.

Research Question 3 was: What do Japanese EFL students perceive to be the positive and negative features of direct error correction? Again, one positive feature of direct WCF was that it enabled learners to identify the correct forms and repair all, or most, of their errors swiftly. Interestingly, however, the interview results illuminated some common environmental or psychological factors that accounted for their predilection for quick and accurate correction. As one such factor, their endeavor to fix every single error, or their fear of being unable to produce target-like forms, was clearly derived from the focus-on-forms-oriented L2 training that they had received in high school where the teachers emphasized grammatical accuracy. Japanese students' tendency to retain the high-school learning strategy is not uncommon (Ono, Midorikawa & Robson, 2001). Particularly, the participants in the present study preferred to have direct error correction on some of the complex structural forms which they were unable to assemble perfectly by themselves, believing that direct feedback was a fail-safe way to find the native-like forms and repair their errors perfectly.

Another common denominator was that the participants tended to prefer direct error correction—or explicit and clearly understandable forms of indirect feedback—because they perceived writing activities as tasks to finish, instead of hands-on training for gradually acquiring grammatical forms. Although the teacher's systematic provision of form-focused feedback was intended to draw learners' attention to target grammatical forms and help them acquire the accurate forms through repeated drafting, the participants were primarily concerned about the completion of their homework assignments. In order to expedite the completion of their tasks, they felt that direct error correction was more useful than indirect feedback. Indirect feedback required more time and efforts on the learner side and did not guarantee that they would find perfect forms in the end. This can also be the reason why they wanted the teacher to correct all, or most, of their grammatical errors on their first drafts.

The author of this paper is in agreement with Ferris's (2004) proposal that editing can contribute to L2 writers' acquisition of grammatical forms as long as it engages learners in cognitive problem-solving (i.e., by providing indirect corrective feedback and requiring them to revise their texts). However, if learners tend to fix texts mechanically, it can undermine the role of editing in language acquisition. It is acknowledged that there is room for argument whether learners should be required to spend a large amount of time and energy for perfectly accurate usage in what is designed to be communicative writing course. As Manchón (2011) argued, writing itself induces L2 writers to pay more attention to linguistic forms and to discourse features, and, thus, engaging them in repeated writing activities may improve their writing skills to a certain extent. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that the participants' tendency to regard L2 writing as a task to finish is posing an obstacle to their

efficient acquisition of grammatical forms in L2 learning.

Direct WCF has a clear weakness in that learners are deprived of opportunities to discover grammatical forms by themselves. This can be explained by the focus-on-form theory that direct provision of isolated model forms (i.e., focus-on-forms instruction) does not facilitate language acquisition (Long, 1983, 1991; Swain, 1985; Schmidt, 1990). However, different participants in this project reacted to this issue differently. Some individuals straightforwardly acknowledged that they were tempted to copy the forms that the teacher had repaired and thought that the correct forms might not remain in their long-term memory, whereas one student argued that she would recycle the reformulated structures in new pieces of writing at her own discretion. Thus, the best instructional alternative might be to provide an optimal combination of indirect and direct WCF, depending on learners' proficiencies and learning experiences, as well as the classroom situations.

It is interesting to notice that, as far as conscientious or enthusiastic learners are concerned, their attitude toward writing activities itself changed over time. One conscientious participant, who tried to learn English by utilizing various language-learning strategies, stated in the first interview that it would be troublesome and tiring to correct newly-discovered errors draft after draft. However, the same student later implied that she was making efforts to develop her own personal language learning activities, instead of being preoccupied with her task to finish homework. Her perception, as well as her practice, might have changed over the semester. Another participant, who took one to two hours on each draft to produce a long and informative essay, had also stated during the first interview that she was in a habit to finish up her draft at once and have it ready for submission. Then, later, reflecting on her course-work experiences, she observed that she had realized that certain grammatical structures were useful for expressing her ideas in the process of drafting and had actually acquired those forms. Yet another participant had trained with her high-school teacher to write English essays in order to achieve her real-life purpose of passing an entrance examination, but, during the repeated process of writing, receiving feedback, and revising, she became aware of the fact that she was benefiting from the provided form-focused feedback.

That is to say, some experienced or conscientious EFL writers started taking on drafting more as opportunities for gradual language acquisition. Thus, there is a strong possibility that other groups with different backgrounds or L2 proficiencies might react to the writing assignments differently and that the same learners' attitude might change in the process of their long-term language learning experience.

Conclusion

The present study showed that the participants acknowledged, and appreciated, the useful function of indirect WCF, which was intended to guide them to acquire linguistic

forms through cognitive processing. At the same time, some indicated a strong desire for direct error correction because it enabled them to locate and repair their errors without fail. Their preference to edit their drafts completely might have derived from the focus-on-forms-oriented instruction in Japanese high school. Furthermore, their preference for direct error correction, or instantly understandable forms of indirect WCF, was related to their tendency to perceive L2 paragraph/essay writing as a task to finish, rather than hands-on training to build up language-learning experiences over time. More interestingly, however, their attitude toward the provided tasks turned out to be dynamic, and learners with diverse L2 learning experiences or greater attentional resources tended to make conscious efforts to utilize repeated drafting for language learning.

The present study is an action research study, and the pedagogical implications for the pertinent EFL writing course can be summarized as follows.

First, the teacher should basically continue to use the coding system to guide Japanese EFL learners to notice and repair their own errors because the participants themselves acknowledged its usefulness. One inevitable problem with direct correction is that many learners, if not all, are tempted to mechanically copy the correct forms provided by the teacher. Thus, providing indirect WCF at one stage or another (preferably on early drafts) to make learners analyze their own problems is indispensable. At the same time, the teacher may repeatedly encourage learners to experiment with different sentence structures and vocabulary items and keep revising the entire texts, instead of mechanically correcting the indicated errors.

Second, the teacher must pay close attention to individual learners' improvement in L2 writing skills and their perceptions of the effectiveness of direct and indirect WCF at each developmental stage so that he can adjust the types of WCF to provide. The advanced learners who keep to the focus-on-forms writing strategy despite their long L2 learning experience should be guided to discover grammatical forms and repair their own errors through indirect feedback. However, as for novice or low-proficiency learners who cannot fully respond to WCF with codes or metalinguistic explanations, direct error correction might be a practical substitute in certain contexts. It might be counterproductive to puzzle them with an excessively greater number of codes or lengthy metalinguistic explanations. At the same time, the teacher must also remember that strongly motivated or highly conscientious learners sometimes utilize even the directly provided forms in a creative way and build up their own learning strategies.

Third, the types of WCF should also be flexibly chosen depending on the types of grammatical errors. For example, if a student misses a definite article before a noun that has already been mentioned in the same paragraph, a brief explanation about anaphora or a direction to "insert *the* before the previously mentioned item or object" will be more useful so that she can continue to apply the rule in her future writing. On the other hand, an

incorrect part of a lexical phrase may be best corrected directly in the form of a red-ink edit because learners are most likely to remember unanalyzed chunks and retrieve them as they are. Furthermore, there are untreatable errors that even the advanced learners cannot repair by themselves (e.g., complicated run-on sentences or certain types of sentence-structure problems), and, regarding such types of errors, direct error correction, combined with some metalinguistic explanations, may be more effective.

Fourth, regarding the indirect WCF using codes, the teacher, particularly when teaching first-year college EFL writing courses, is advised to develop an easily understandable and usable coding system. The table of codes should be thoroughly edited so that the codes, definitions, and examples are sufficient and not excessively complex. Preemptive measures are crucially important in order to control for this problem, although it is acknowledged that some learners may still fail to attend to the provided table of codes. The teacher must always keep in mind that a coding system can present a challenge to some learners and try to check and confirm—repeatedly over the semester—if the learners are utilizing the codes appropriately.

Fifth, the most effective alternative is to use an optimal combination of several different types of direct or indirect WCF, taking the characteristics of the learners and the L2 environment into consideration. In addition to the combination of direct correction, use of codes, and metalinguistic explanation, the teacher can also offer teacher-student conferences—either in or outside of class—to individual learners after providing WCF on their drafts, so the learners will have a chance to clarify the linguistic problems that they cannot solve by themselves. Exploring an effective and practical combination of different forms of WCF and writing tasks for each particular group of learners at each developmental stage might be the ultimate goal for EFL writing teachers to pursue.

Finally, it is important to start guiding learners to take on writing assignments as an autonomous learning process, instead of being overly dependent on teacher feedback. The participants in the present study were conscientious enough to pay attention to teacher feedback and try to repair as many errors as possible. Then, the next stage is for them to acquire strategies and techniques to track and log their own error patterns, make a checklist, and repair most of the treatable errors before submitting their first drafts to the teacher.

The present study laid an indispensable foundation for several follow-up studies. Whereas the purpose of this study was limited to understanding learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of direct and indirect WCF, future research studies can be designed to longitudinally track EFL learners' acquisition of grammatical forms in response to teacher feedback. The correlations between their linguistic improvement and their perception of the roles of direct and indirect WCF might be evaluated continually.

Another major issue for investigation, related to L2 learners' acquisition of grammatical

forms, is thorough analysis of treatable and untreatable errors. Although earlier studies have proposed a way to differentiate treatable and untreatable errors (Ferris, 2006), the types of grammatical errors that L2 learners cannot autonomously deal with differ, depending on L2 environment (e.g., EFL, ESL, writing of discipline-based papers) and linguistic proficiency (Ferris, 2011). Clarification of the particular types of sentence structures that different groups of Japanese EFL students find difficult would provide useful and meaningful information on this issue.

In addition to determining the degree to which WCF facilitates students' acquisition of particular grammatical forms, it is worthwhile to conduct more interviews to probe into the psychological impact that individual learners with different personality traits receive in specific learning contexts. Even a directly provided exemplar may be imprinted in certain learners' memory instantaneously and semi-permanently when some psychological factors come into play and make them attend closely to the target form in real time. Learners' individual differences may be qualitatively evaluated by administering in-depth unstructured or semi-structured interviews whereas the treatable and untreatable errors can be determined more precisely through quantitative text analyses.

Again, the present study was limited to the investigation of a small student group's perception of various types of direct and indirect WCF, not the effects of WCF on language acquisition per se. However, thorough understanding of the students' inner thoughts and their backgrounds that have led them to respond to direct and indirect feedback in particular ways is an indispensable foundation for future studies on the effects of WCF on Japanese EFL learners' acquisition of challenging grammatical forms. Consequently, it is believed that the present study has made a minor but important contribution to the understanding of the roles of teacher feedback in L2 writing.

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