Preference Consequentialism: An Ethical Proposal to Resolve the Writing Error Correction Debate in EFL Classroom

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Inspired by the recent trends in education towards learner autonomy with their emphasis on the interests and desires of the students, and borrowing ideas from philosophy (particularly ethics), the present study is an attempt to investigate the discrepancy in the findings of the studies addressing error correction in L2 writing instruction, and suggest the (oft-neglected) students' beliefs, interests and wants as what can point the way out of confusion. To this end, a questionnaire was developed and 56 advanced adult EFL learners were asked to complete the questionnaire. The opinions of 20 EFL teachers were also collected using another questionnaire. Twenty-three of the students and 13 of the teachers were then interviewed in an attempt to collect explanations for their answers in the questionnaires. The results indicated that *all* the learners wanted the errors in their writings to be corrected. About 90 percent of them believed that *all* the errors in their writings should be corrected and only less than 10 percent of them agreed that there is no need to correct *all* the errors and that only "important" errors should be rectified. On the contrary, of the teachers who participated in the study, only 20 percent believed that *all* the errors in the students' writings should be corrected. While most of the interviewed students attributed their preference of choice to feeling more confident and efficient in learning when they can recognize *all* the errors in their written assignments, most of the teachers believed that by correcting *important* errors (and not *all* errors), learners can get the most of their writings. Given the incongruity between teachers' and (advanced) students' beliefs over writing error correction, and considering advanced students as legitimate decision makers for their own learning, some suggestions are offered for EFL writing teachers.

Keywords: Second language writing; Error correction; Advanced learners; Ethics; Preference utilitarian approach; Learners' preference.

1. Introduction

Writing error correction in EFL classes has recently piqued the interest of teachers and researchers and to date different proposals have been made as to how errors of EFL learners should be corrected. Not uncommon to

controversial areas of investigation, the new proposals are sometimes found to be incongruent with and even, in some cases, in clear opposition to the existing frameworks. However, what seems to link all these studies is the endeavor to best help the EFL students improve their writing. This can perhaps be deemed as "the most consuming of all dilemmas for L2 writing teachers" (Casanave, 2004, p. 64).

Many studies have been conducted thus far to investigate the effects of error correction in L2 writing, but as Lee (2004) states, "Error correction research has focused mostly on whether teachers should correct errors in student writing and how they should go about it" (p. 285). What seems to be missing in most of these studies is the students' feelings, attitudes and beliefs about error correction. Here, students' proficiency levels can play a decisive role. As adult students become more proficient in language, they can generally assume more responsibility in relation to their instruction and the decisions that need to be made in that connection.

Nor have the teachers' perception and attitudes regarding error feedback received due attention. What adds to the significance of the issue is the discrepancy in the findings of studies which have tried to examine the effect of error correction in L2 writing instruction. While some studies have found this effect to be positive (e.g. Ferris, 2004), there is research to suggest that error correction is ineffective (e.g., Cohen & Robbins, 1976) and even at times harmful (Truscott, 1996). There seems not to be a general consensus among research findings in this area. Although, as Guénette (2007) contends, researchers may construe this uncertainty as an opportunity to refine their studies, it leaves EFL teachers befuddled about the best way to help their students with their writing.

In fact the main motive behind this study was to have a better examination of those aspects which might contribute to a better understanding of the issue under question and which have as yet not been paid serious attention to. This might help clear some of the confusions that prevail in the area of writing error correction and provide EFL teachers with a practical plan of action in their classes. All in all, the present study was conducted first to review the recent findings on the effects of error correction in L2 writing instruction and then have a critical view on both researchers and teachers for their neglect of the other major stakeholders, those who are affected by the findings of researchers and the practice of teachers, namely students.

2. Background

Error correction in L2 writing is one of the contentious areas in EFL instruction. In fact, what makes it so controversial can be readily understood by analyzing the phrase proper: "Writing error correction". The principal

conundrum here lies in working with the writing skill. As a relatively fledgling area of investigation whose specialization is a relatively new area of inquiry, English L2 writing was not simply considered as a language skill to be taught to learners until the late 1970s. L2 writing is an interesting yet immature area of investigation. Taking stock of the immaturity of writing research, Reid (2001) suggests that "many of the concerns now being investigated … will continue to be refined and revisited" (p. 32), an assumption implicit in Reid's dubbing the final section of his chapter "The Future" which speaks to the fact that although significant changes have transpired and researchers working in this area abound, the point that L2 writing research is lagging behind some other issues in EFL instruction can hardly be denied.

The second problem involves error correction. In general terms, error correction is called for when learners' incomplete competence or incorrect generalizations or hypotheses lead to errors. Research has indicated that students want teachers to correct their errors for them (e.g., Zhang, 1995). Nevertheless, different issues should be factored in when correcting errors in writing, the first, and arguably foremost, of which is whether teachers should correct all the errors or they should select some of the errors to correct (comprehensive vs. selective error correction).

In a study examining the effect of content feedback followed by form feedback on students' composition ability, Ashwell (2000) prefers to be as comprehensive as possible in giving feedback, though he states that authorities generally advise teachers to be selective in their form feedback. He then justifies his preference by explaining that he did so to preclude the common systematic problems that might have otherwise arisen. Lee (2003) also posits that "selective error feedback is a much more viable option" (p. 218). However, the findings of her study (2004) revealed that both teachers and learners preferred comprehensive error feedback and this is what the majority of teachers do in practice. She also presumes that teachers may not know how to provide selective error feedback systematically. As Ashwell (2000) relates, Leki (1991) and Raimes (1983) suggest that teachers should be selective in providing grammar feedback to their students. Although selective error correction is generally advised to teachers, the debate over "what criterion to utilize, when and how" does not seem to be any easier to resolve than the original one between comprehensive and selective error correction.

The second issue which needs to be considered when correcting students' writing errors is the approach that teachers choose to correct the errors. They can either correct the errors in a direct (explicit) manner or they may decide to employ an indirect (implicit) approach. While some researchers found indirect error correction more appropriate and useful for learners (for

instance, Lalande, 1982), there are studies which suggest that direct error correction is favorable (e.g., Chandler, 2003). In indirect correction, errors are identified, but they are not corrected and students are to correct the errors. Different teachers employ different techniques to identify errors in students' writings. For instance, they may prefer to code errors, circle them or underline them or use other innovative ways to identify errors.

A word of caution seems in order here. As Seedhouse (1997) suggests error correction can vary depending on the focus. He believes that the focus of correction can be on either form and accuracy or meaning and fluency. Whatever the focus, teachers can provide feedback comprehensively or selectively. In fact, their focus of correction does not determine whether error correction should be done comprehensively or selectively. The same holds true for implicit/explicit dichotomy. Teachers can decide to correct their students' writing errors in an explicit or explicit manner, but irrespective of the comprehensiveness of error correction.

As intriguing as (and even more fundamental than) the question of the approach of error correction in L2 writing is whether correction should be made at all and whether it is beneficial for the L2 learners to have their errors corrected. In fact, what Ferris (2004) calls the "debate", commenced in 1996 when Truscott (1996) made a big claim – that error correction is harmful for students. The article has provoked heated discussions and different responses have since been published from both parties, those in favor of error correction, and those against error correction, and basically it is the former who according to Polio, Fleck and Leder (1998) are the side responsible to prove their claim.

There is a good body of research to suggest that error correction in L2 writing is propitious for learners. Ferris, the head of the pro-correction camp, maintains that there is some "potentially positive research evidence" on the effects of error correction in L2 writing instruction (2004, p. 50). This chimes well with the findings of Kepner's study (1991) that accuracy improves over time when students receive error feedback. Chandler's study (2003), too, showed significant positive effect for error feedback. Ashwell (2000) and Ferris and Roberts (2001) also found that error correction is favorable over no correction.

One of the difficulties in making any generalization as to whether error feedback in L2 writing is beneficial or destructive is the ethical dimension of conducting studies to compare correction with no-correction control groups as one cannot deny some students what may help them simply because they are the control group of the study. The results of these studies which are few and far between need to be viewed with caution, since there are a set of factors which are usually overlooked when comparing the two groups (for

instance, see Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In addition, it seems that it is not sufficient in such studies simply to have a control group (see Guénette, 2007). The two groups must be comparable in every way which is not usually the case in the research studies conducted so far.

There are, on the other hand, some studies which have found no clear empirical evidence in support of error feedback. Sheppard (1992), for instance, conducted a 10-week longitudinal study and found no positive effect for error feedback. Polio et al. (1998) found that in terms of linguistic accuracy, the performance of the students who were asked to revise their writings and received additional grammar exercises was no better than the control group of the study. The findings of Cohen and Robbins (1976) and Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) also side with the same view.

At the same time, a number of studies have found detrimental effects for error feedback. Truscott (1996) can be considered as a fervent adherent of this view. Also, there are others who seem to have reached a similar conclusion. For instance in a longitudinal study, Fazio (2001) found that after five months, students, both those who received feedback on form and those who received feedback on content, made more errors in their writings.

As can be inferred from this brief review, the findings and ideas of researchers working in the area of error feedback in L2 writing do not seem to have converged on a clear conclusion, and Ferris (2004) is probably right in asserting that "we have barely gotten started on the question of 'Does error feedback help?' " (p. 55). Students, however, seem to be less confused as to what they want their teachers to do. L2 student writers want their teachers to provide feedback on their errors (Chandler, 2003; Ferris 1995, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996, to name but a few). According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), "Virtually all learners, particularly, older ones, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered" (p. 59). They suggest that these beliefs and opinions are usually derived from learners' previous experiences and the assumptions they develop for themselves as regards the best way of learning and instruction for them.

The present study is an attempt to shed light on one of the challenging aspects of writing instruction in EFL classes. In particular, this is an attempt to seek compromise to the as yet two unresolved disputes in the related literature. First, researchers do not seem to be unanimous in considering error feedback in writing as beneficial. Teachers usually find it difficult to know what they should do, and even if they do not, they have a hard time justifying their practice. As such, teachers may feel confused and their practice with regard to writing error correction can best be described as idiosyncratic if not haphazard.

Second, and probably equally important, is the question of the comprehensiveness of error correction. No matter who provides students with feedback on their errors (i.e., teacher, peer or self), owing to the inconsistencies in the findings of studies conducted so far, teachers are left to decide whether to employ a comprehensive or a selective approach in their writing classes. Again it needs to be pointed out that the approach teachers decide to employ at this point does not determine the one who should correct the errors. Both comprehensive and selective error correction can be done by either the teacher or peers, or even the student writer themselves. In a word, the present study's main objective is to help demystify these disputes by drawing on the ideas of the learners proper, those who hold the largest stakes but seem to have been left out, so to speak, in the cold.

3. METHOD

This study was an attempt to collect the beliefs, opinions, wants, and desires of students about error feedback in L2 writing instruction and compare them with those of teachers'. In fact, this study is an effort to understand typical modus operandi in an EFL classroom and identify the inconsistencies between how teachers think they should teach and how learners think teachers should teach. This might help provide evidence for teachers and even policy makers to account for their inclusion or exclusion of the (oft-neglected) learners' attitudes in the process of making decision as to what is best for them.

3.1. Participants

The data used in this study were collected from both EFL learners and teachers. The learners were 56 adult EFL learners, 59% female and 41% male. They could be considered as advanced learners of English regarding proficiency since they had all finished studying New Interchange Series (Richards, Hull & Proctor) and at the time of data collection they were participating in, as it were, post-Interchange courses such as "Panel Discussion: A Course for Advanced Students" or preparation courses for IELTS, TOEFL, GRE. All of them were adult learners of English (more than 18 years old) and most of them were university students of different majors.

The teachers were 12 females and 8 males whose years of work experience of teaching ranged from 1.5 to 11 (average 3.5 years). Whereas for the inclusion of the students in the study a certain criterion had to be met (i.e., proficiency), no criterion was used in selecting the teachers for the study. They were teaching classes of different levels of proficiency and were selected randomly.

3.2. Instrumentation

Students' survey: The survey consisted of a 25-item questionnaire which started with personal questions about educational and language background of the students ensued by items about their beliefs, desires and attitudes toward learning. Since the respondents were advanced learners of English and it was assumed that they would have no problem understanding the language, the questionnaire was given in English. In fact, the questionnaire had been originally developed by the first author as a "first session questionnaire" for the purpose of eliciting the needs, wants and desires of learners and had been revised over different administrations. The questionnaire was designed in a way that through the initial questions, the learners were required to have an evaluation of themselves and were thereafter directed towards expressing their beliefs and opinions about their learning. The questionnaire included different topics but items 16, 17 and 18 were particularly embedded in the questionnaire to address our research questions:

16. On a scale of 1 to 5 where "1" means not important at all, "5" means extremely important and "3" means moderately important, how important do you think it is to receive feedback on errors in your writing assignments?

Not important at all ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Extremely important

17. How would you like the errors in your writing to be treated?
    ☐ All the errors should be corrected
    ☐ There is no need to correct all the errors (only important errors should be corrected)

18. Who do you think should correct the errors in your writings?
    ☐ Yourself
    ☐ Teacher
    ☐ Your peers (classmates)

Subsidiary to the items addressing the main purpose of the study, there were some other items in the questionnaire which were used to collect additional, supplementary information. One pertained to whether they revised their papers after receiving feedback. Another asked the learners to evaluate their progress in writing where the learners had to check whether they were making no, some, or good progress in L2 writing. Another item whose results were analyzed and used was the one which asked the learners which skill they considered as their weakest. Six items were designed in a way to cross-

check each other in a pairwise manner. For instance, the answers to item 16 were verified by the answers to item 24:

24. Do you like to receive feedback on the errors in your writings?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Teachers' survey: A short questionnaire was used to collect teachers' opinions. First, they had to express their opinion as to whether they thought L2 writing error correction should be done at all or not. In order to cross-check their answers to this question, an item was included in the questionnaire which asked whether they thought error correction was harmful and should be abolished. They were also required to state whether they thought they should correct *all* the students' writing errors. The final item sought teachers' opinion as to who is responsible for the correction of errors – teachers, learners or their peers.

Follow-up interviews with the students: Once the students completed the questionnaire, 23 of them were interviewed individually by one of the researchers. The follow-up interview was semi-structured such that similar questions were asked from the students but both the students and the researcher/interviewer were free to deviate from the pre-set plan. The interview enquired the same questions as the ones in the students' questionnaire followed by some questions trying to elicit the reasons that the learners thought would account for their opinions expressed in the survey.

Follow-up interviews with the teacher: Of the teachers who completed the teachers' survey, 13 were asked to participate in an interview with one of the researchers. In practice, the interviews were less structured than the ones with the learners. In effect, the teachers' interviews were friendly conversations in which the researcher/interviewer tried to ask the teachers to tell their approach to error correction, to express their personal beliefs in this regard, to express what they thought about related research findings, and state what they thought should be teachers' classroom practice in relation to error correction. The main pivots on which all the above-mentioned data collection instruments revolved were the pragmatic necessity of error feedback and the discussion of comprehensiveness (or selectiveness) of error correction in L2 writing.

3.3. Procedure

To collect learners' and teachers' ideas, attitudes and opinions about error correction in L2 writing, two sets of instruments (questionnaire and

interview) were used. The students' survey had 25 items and the students were asked to complete it in 20 minutes in the first session of their course. The time limit was not strict and the students were informed that they could take more time if they liked. In practice, it did not take more than 20 minutes for any of the respondents to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was given to four classes of advanced learners. Out of the 56 students, 23 were interviewed. Each interview took about 13 minutes on average (ranging between 10 to 18 minutes), but there were cases when an interview lasted for almost 20 minutes. In fact, the interviews were to form part of the speaking scores of the students and were done on the last session of the courses, 9 weeks after the students answered to the questionnaire.

The teachers completed their questionnaire individually. On average, it did not take more than 10 minutes for the teachers to complete the survey. From the 20 teachers who answered to the questionnaire, 13 were asked to have an interview. The interviews normally took about 15 minutes unless the teachers felt that they wanted to explain certain issues more. The data from the questionnaires and interview recordings were then analyzed to find the recurring patterns of students' and teachers' wants and attitudes.

3.4. Analysis

The students' survey was a 25-item questionnaire which included items that concerned the purposes of the present study. The analysis of the students' questionnaire mostly involved descriptive statistics. The analysis of the teachers' survey was also descriptive. As far as the interviews were concerned, effort was made to find similar patterns in the reasons that the respondents gave to explain their choices in the survey. The interviews with the students were not much complex compared to those with teachers. Of significance at this point was to catalog the reasons they set out, and look for the similarities and recurring patterns in an inductive manner, and try to combine related ideas and render them in several statements. The teachers' interviews were of a more delicate nature since the interviews were unstructured, and the issues raised and discussed were various.

The responses of the teachers were classified under four general headings. The first group concerned the actual practice of teachers in their classrooms in relation to error correction. The second set was about the teachers' personal belief and opinion concerning their practice. Teachers' ideas about the corresponding research findings in the literature were collected under the third set. Finally, their ideas about the best and ideal way of error correction in terms of comprehensiveness were drawn together under the fourth heading. For one thing, this could facilitate the search for recurring patterns

of response. For another, by so doing, the whole ideas of the teachers could be analyzed and subsequently reported in a more systematic manner.

4. Results

The results of the students' survey revealed that, in effect, *all* the learners wanted the errors in their writings to be corrected. Also, all the students interviewed believed that error correction is necessary and that it can help them in the process of learning.

It was also found from the survey that some 90 percent of the learners believed that their errors in a writing task should be corrected comprehensively. The typical snap response to the interviewer's question on the reason of this belief was "*I want/like to know all of my errors*". They usually continued with statements such as "*I feel more confident when I know all my errors*" and "*I can learn more this way*" or some other related explanations for their choice.

Peripheral though as it may be to the main purpose of the study, it was somewhat surprising to learn that while they did not have a negative opinion of their peers and peer-correction in general, all but one of the learners uttered that even when their writings are corrected by their peers, they would like to have it supplemented by their teacher's feedback.

Regarding the revision of papers after receiving feedback, 77 percent of the learners taking the survey selected the option "*I do not revise my writing after it is corrected and handed back to me*". It was amazing to find that about 78 percent of the learners (who were advanced in proficiency of course) considered their writing skill as their weakest among the four language skills. Most of the learners took a dim view of their own progress in writing such that only 43 percent of them believed that "*I'm making good progress in writing*" and 30 percent assumed that "*I'm making 'some' progress in writing*".

Results from the teachers' survey revealed that all of the teachers believe that generally error correction is effective (and not ineffective or harmful). In the interviews, however, most of them (76 percent) believed that the effectiveness of error correction is contingent on the "manner" or "way" of correcting students' errors. The term "affective factors" was used by 6 teachers to explain that in order for error correction to be effective these factors have to be taken into account and that otherwise error correction can become harmful. They could also think of anecdotes when they discouraged or disappointed a student correcting their errors in an inappropriate manner (for instance in front of the whole class).

Considering the comprehensiveness of error correction, 80 percent of the teachers stated that there is no need to correct all the errors in students'

writings and the majority of those interviewed (almost 77 percent) reported that in practice they adopt an approach to error correction tailored to the level of proficiency of their learners. Some of the teachers questioned the possibility of correcting *all* errors in a piece of writing. There were teachers, however, who took sides with comprehensive error correction mostly on the grounds that the students were advanced in proficiency. The reasons they proposed for doing so were various. However, there were some reasons that were more popular among the respondents. Most of the teachers felt that it is their responsibility to tell the students all their errors. Some sent the ball to students' court and uttered that "*Students prefer so*". One teacher believed that this was what she was told to do in her training course (which was not in fact the case, as in a friendly talk with the supervisor, she asserted that there are no regulations imposed on the teachers as to how students' errors in writing should be corrected or what kind of feedback is preferable). A couple of teachers argued that "It is not always easy to tell important errors from unimportant ones" or as one teacher said "*It's not easy to do selective error correction systematically.*"

About one third of the teachers (mostly the more experienced ones) described their approach as selective in the sense that they set criteria for correcting students' errors and the criteria are elucidated to the students in the opening sessions of the course. One teacher, for instance, included organization, word choice and grammatical accuracy in his criteria. What is interesting is that half of the teachers who utilized criteria in selecting errors to be corrected were inconsistent in their practice with regard to the errors which could be related to a certain criterion. As they reported, there were times when considering one criterion they provide feedback on *all* the relevant errors, and yet at other times they simply decide to ignore some errors and leave them as they are.

Three teachers also emphasized the importance of the aim of the course in general, and the focus of each session in particular. They also described this focused approach to error correction as selective. By the same token, this group was also inconsistent in their practice. When asked "With regard to a certain focus, do you correct all the errors related to that focus or you prefer to be selective?" two of them said, "well, it depends" and one said "*Sometimes I think that it is better to select some and other times all errors should be corrected*".

All the teachers interviewed admitted that their knowledge about error correction in writing was insufficient and that they did not know much about research findings in this connection. Only three teachers had studied one or two research articles on error correction/feedback in L2 writing, and 10 teachers had not in fact studied any article on this subject. All but one of the

teachers were uncertain about the best and ideal way of error correction in writing. Yet most of them presumed that their approach to error correction has worked. The only teacher who claimed to know the best and ideal way of error correction described her approach as "*indirect teacher feedback → direct peer feedback → revision by the student writer*", which seemed to be a personal speculation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Error correction in L2 writing has become a heated topic of enquiry for ELT researchers which has yet remained unresolved. The main controversy concerns what Ferris (2004) refers to as the "big question" (p. 50): Does error feedback help L2 student writers? The number of studies addressing this question is increasing, but serious reservations can still be expressed nonetheless as to the utility of error feedback in L2 writing. Whereas different studies have sought to find an all-embracing answer to the query, what is critical is their inattentiveness to some issues that can be argued to relate to the enquiry.

In fact, what seems to be missing in most of the studies examining the question is the significance of what *learners* think. The present study was therefore a two-fold effort to address this "lost chain", first in the hope of proposing a dialectical resolution for the dispute between those in favor of error correction and those against it. Second, and equally as important, it tried to address the comprehensive/selective debate, and suggest a "preference utilitarian" compromise which can bring about, as much as possible, the satisfaction of individual preferences of those involved.

In effect, the debates have yet remained unresolved, and meanwhile teachers are left confused as to what to do in their classes. Considering the inconsistent findings of the research studies conducted so far, what the present study took in perspective was the beliefs, ideas, desires and opinions of the main stakeholders. Now that the research base on the "big question" is "inadequate" (Ferris, 2004, p. 50) and even "contradictory" (Guénette, 2007, p. 40), and "We are far from arriving at any conclusions about error correction in L2 writing classes" (Ferris, p. 56), why not ask the question from those for whom the whole research is carried out?

Truscott (1996), however, is correct to suggest that students may not always be the best judges of what they need. Yet, this may be a more reasonable speculation for beginners than for advanced adults. In fact, the logic of the argument that advanced adult learners are proficient enough to know what is best for them can be defied only with great difficulty. Everyone agrees that not *all* students are able to decide what is best for them no matter how old they are. Yet, it is not implausible to assume that regarding adult students, the

more advanced and proficient they are, the more control they can assume on their learning and the more autonomy they should be granted over the instruction they receive.

Autonomy, in harmony with the Self-Determination Theory (Dickinson, 1995), can help facilitate better learning. Noels, Clément, and Pelletier's (2001) contention that teachers can change students' motivation by utilizing ways that foster students' autonomy seems to be in the same line of approach. According to them, the perception of freedom of choice is linked to self-determined forms of motivation. Dickinson, therefore, seems quite persuasive in maintaining that due to internalization of the locus of control, learners who are intrinsically motivated are expected to be "more effective" (p. 73). At the same time, Vandergrift (2005) quite rightly admits that the preference of granting (too much) autonomy to learners "early in the learning process" (p. 85) may be met with some objection. Generally, as might be expected, proficient learners of a foreign language can enjoy more autonomy in making decisions in learning. As Cotterall (2000) suggests, promotion of learner autonomy is predicated upon development of students' learning awareness. In a word, the more proficient learners are, the more autonomy they can enjoy.

Taking the factors for developing autonomy in students as the point of reference (see Lee, 1998), one can hardly deny the importance of learner choice in autonomous learning. As one can argue, and quite plausibly indeed, in order to become autonomous, students should be granted autonomy in making decisions in learning which involves "setting objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring the procedure, and evaluating the outcome of learning" (p. 283). At least with regard to advanced learners of English, until researchers can propose what can be considered more than their "best guesses" (Ferris, 2004, p. 59), teachers should rely on what their students want and believe is best for them. Also, as Guénette (2007) posits, the issue of proficiency levels is one of the parameters that may account for the conflicting results of the written corrective feedback studies. He seems convincing in warning that "the overall proficiency level of the students must be considered before deciding when and how to provide error feedback." (p. 43)

There is now a considerable body of research to reveal that students want error feedback in L2 writing, and they want their errors be corrected (Chandler, 2003; Ferris et al., 2000; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Radecki & Swales, 1988). The findings of the present study also support this and as Ferris (2004) suggests, unless teachers are sure that error feedback does not help students and may in fact harm them, "it is unethical to withhold it from their students" (p. 51), since this is what students want and think

works best for them. Even Ferris, though implicitly, acknowledges that "L2 writing students' strongly stated desires for error feedback could not so easily be dismissed or ignored" (2004, p. 50). In the case of the present study, what is important is that the participants are proficient learners of English and this can lend credibility to their opinion as to what works best for them.

Concerning the comprehensiveness of error correction, by putting the results from the students' and teachers' surveys and interviews together, it can be concluded that overall, proficient L2 learners prefer comprehensive error feedback and believe that they benefit from it and this is what some EFL teachers do in practice. What is interesting about these teachers is that they tend to correct errors comprehensively against, as they claimed, their better judgment. They felt that it is in contrast with research findings and what they have been told to do in teacher training courses.

All in all, with regard to the results of the study, two points need to be taken into account. First, it can be argued that in virtually every classroom, proficiency is an important factor when dividing the shares in decision-making between the teacher and learners. The more proficient the students, the more responsibility they can assume for their instruction, what they learn and how they learn it. Ferris (2004) shares the same idea with Truscott (1996) and Muncie (2002) and notes that "students are not … always the best judges of what they need most" (p. 55). However, as can be inferred from this statement, there are times that students are reliable judges of how and what they should learn. As Cook (2003) argues, one of the criticisms which can be leveled at second language acquisition research and attempts thereof is the generic use of the term "the learner". Ferris's position may come in for the same criticism. Although in an article describing the-state-of-the-art in error correction research in L2 writing, she, quite generally, mentions "subject characteristics" as one of the factors resulting in the inconsistencies in the design of error correction in L2 writing studies which consequently makes the studies in the research base fundamentally incomparable, the fact that the term "students" is used as a general term can give the impression that, at least on the face of it, all students are considered the same in this regard. The idea needs to be revisited.

Second, regardless of whether learners' beliefs, opinions and assumptions are right or wrong about what is best for them, as Lightbown and Spada (1999) state, "the available research indicates that learner beliefs can be strong mediating factors in their experience in the classroom" (p. 59). Ferris (2004) assumes that lack of feedback may lead to anxiety on the part of learners which may decrease motivation. Muncie (2002) also remarks that ignoring learner beliefs could consequently lower motivation which has negative effects on learning. On the whole, as Mori (2002) contends, there are

correlations between learner beliefs and learner performance. This is not unexpected, since students' beliefs about learning form a component of their metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998), and, after all, "There is no clear consensus on the distinctions between knowledge and beliefs" (p. 517).

Research studies investigating learner beliefs are fuzzy. In fact, although learner beliefs about second language acquisition is an extensively researched area, as Tse (2000) notes, "we know almost nothing about student attributions of success or failure in the FL classroom and how these attributions may affect their beliefs about their ability to learn languages" (p. 69). Yet, it is possible to argue that the research findings so far lend support to the specificity of the relationship between learner beliefs and strategy use (Mori, 1999, 2002; Mori, Sato & Shimizu, 2007; and Yang, 1999). In general, learner beliefs will have an impact on the kinds of strategies they choose when/for learning which can eventually make a difference in the linguistic performance of learners. (See Horwitz, 1988; Mori, 1999; and Savignon & Wang, 2003, for a general discussion of learner beliefs, attitudes and perceptions.)

Three words of caution are in order here. First, the available research has not generally examined learners' progress in relation to their beliefs and attitudes regarding what and how they learn. The number of studies that have considered students' ideas, wants and desires in examining the effects of providing feedback on learners' development over time seems inadequate which in turn makes getting to any generalization in this connection difficult. It seems that any proposal at this point should be sensitive to the context of learning (including learners' level of proficiency).

Second, seemingly when it comes to error feedback in L2 writing classes, the idea of learner autonomy sides more with learner-initiated correction than teacher-initiated feedback. Students are expected to become autonomous learners and be able to self-monitor their process of learning. L2 learners' self-monitoring, though compelling as it may seem, entails training on the part of learners. Cresswell (2000) considers this as one of the drawbacks of self-monitoring in student writing and further comments that students in his study suggested that feedback should not be exclusively student-oriented. They wanted their teacher's feedback on the errors they did not ask questions about. Whether they initiate feedback or the teacher, students appear to opt for an approach which assures them that they know their errors. After all, even the best of students may at times have difficulty identifying their errors. Increasing learner autonomy, as it would seem, is by no means at odds with comprehensive error feedback. In simple terms, the fact that who initiates feedback (teacher or student) or who provides feedback on errors (teacher or

peer) does not gainsay comprehensive error correction for advanced learners.

Third, it seems that it is not the kind of feedback that has the major effect on the improvement of students' L2 writing. There are some factors which seem to have more significant impact on learners' L2 writing ability. Ferris (2004) suggests that "the cognitive investment of editing one's text after receiving error feedback" (p. 54) can possibly be considered as a necessary, or at least a helpful, condition for longer term improvement in accuracy. Although error feedback may be a necessary condition for writing improvement, it may not be the sufficient condition in this connection. It seems on the whole that it is difficult to differentiate the effects on the improvement in accuracy of error correction from other factors, particularly in longitudinal studies, and it is not implausible to argue that though researchers may have a hard time demonstrating the efficacy of error feedback in L2 writing over time, it can be an equally thorny problem for them to substantiate its uselessness.

It is important to note that this preference utilitarian approach may seem consistent with the primacy of *the local* in the postmodernist ideology according to which individual voices and visions are promoted in a contextualist interpretation of the term. However, the recognition of individual voices and choices is not meant to result in their unquestionable acceptance. Learners' ideas are cherished insofar as they can be dialogically negotiated in the classroom community of learning created collaboratively by the teacher and students. Dialog is arguably inherent to the evolvement from the classical to the modern to the postmodern. Central as dialog is in this approach, it is primarily intended to be considered as a compromise rather than a polemic in favor of a certain direction of thought.

To conclude, the implications of the studies which have investigated L2 writing feedback are ample and various. On the whole, the present study suggests that students' preferences, perceptions and beliefs about what is best for them cannot be easily tuned out. Borrowing ideas from modern ethicists and philosophers, in a preference utilitarian approach to error correction, it is the individual preferences of learners that are of prime concern. Teachers should realize that students do want feedback. Equally important is that teachers should recognize that their students have preferences, ideas and opinions, and the further they are along the development of their language learning, the more credibility can be assigned to their ideas. Teachers have to negotiate with their students as to how error feedback should be provided.

This is what can also be regarded from the perspective of critical pedagogy. The "guiding principle" in critical pedagogy, according to Benesch (2001), is that what the teacher should do "is an ongoing negotiation based on the

interests, desires, and needs of the students" (p. 66). Students should be allowed to take part in decision making in the classroom, which in turn can create positive effects on their learning and may increase their motivation in learning. Students, consciously or unconsciously, value critical pedagogy. Corroborating evidence is offered by Crookes and Lehner (1998) who reported that the students in their study responded positively to the principles of critical pedagogy such as being able to make decisions. In a similar vein, the present study provides evidence to support the idea that students who are proficient in language want all their errors be corrected for them. This is what *they* feel is important for *their* language learning and success. No matter how inconsistent the research findings are in this area, proficient students know what they want. Unless research can take us ahead along the continuum of certainty, the demotivating denial of what they want does not seem to be among the best of our available options.

In spite of all this, error correction in L2 writing classes, as a means which can lead to the development of students in learning English, is not a simple matter as it may seem. Ferris (1999) is right in suggesting that "Poorly done error correction will not help student writers and may even mislead them" (p. 4). This implies that teachers (and would-be teachers) need more training and practice in error correction.

The findings of the present study can at best be taken as suggestions which are applicable to EFL learners with a certain level of proficiency and are not intended to be generalized to other students. In addition, further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of this negotiated approach to error correction.

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