Estetisk-filosofiska fakulteten

Angela Lindqvist

“A Help to Help Yourself”
A study on feedback and error corrections in Swedish upper-secondary students’ English essays

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Författare: Angela Lindqvist
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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to investigate different types of feedback and how they are used in schools, and to see which of them are preferred when it comes to error correction. Feedback is used in schools every day even though it is difficult to know if students really learn from it. Students tend to only glance briefly at the paper or test when it is returned and then throw it away. They are interested in how they scored but not really in how to improve their errors until next time. In this study, students wrote essays which were corrected with four different types of feedback and handed back to the students. The students got a chance to revise them and then the result was analyzed. The students were also given a questionnaire in order for me to find out what kind of feedback they liked the most and compare it to the result of the essay corrections. The different feedback types worked well with different students in general, although, underlining with description did not only work best, it was also chosen as the best type by most students. They seemed to think that this type was good for learning something from the feedback. Most students wanted to look for errors themselves instead of getting the correct answer from the teacher.
1. Introduction and aims

Feedback is used in schools every day, although there are no formal rules for how it should be given. Teachers have different experiences when it comes to giving feedback and therefore it can look very different depending on who is providing it. It is also difficult to know if students really learn from the feedback. Based on my earlier experiences, students tend to look briefly at the comments on a written paper or test and then throw it away. They are interested in how they scored, but not really in how to improve their performance for the next time.

When I went to school I remember waiting for the test results. The grade was important, but I did not care much about the error corrections. I considered the only interesting form of feedback the positive or negative comments next to the grade, but it never really occurred to me that error corrections and comments in the text could actually teach me something. Therefore I believe that it is important for teachers to use feedback in a more efficient manner and actually get the students to learn something from it.

My aim with this paper is to see how students perceive feedback and which kind of feedback is best to use in connection with written assignments. I started out by investigating what different researchers say about feedback. I have also carried out a study of my own in a Swedish upper secondary school to see what kind of feedback is preferred in two English classes and how it can be used the best way. I had 55 students write an essay and then gave them different kinds of feedback on it. After they had had a chance to correct their errors with the help of the feedback provided, the students were handed a questionnaire where they could express their opinions on matters related to feedback.

2. Background

In this section I will look more closely into what kinds of studies have been made earlier and what different researchers say about errors and feedback.
2.1. Errors

2.1.1. Errors and mistakes

Some people like to distinguish between a mistake and an error. Errors are often described as gaps in a learner’s knowledge. They occur because the learner simply does not know what is correct. A mistake, on the other hand, is often considered the incorrect expression of something the learner already knows, but is sporadically unable to put into practice (Ellis, 1998:17). Even though the terms are often used with these distinct meanings, I will from now on use the terms interchangeably.

2.1.2. What is an error?

An error in a classroom is often marked by the teacher as something inappropriate or incorrect. But this does not necessarily mean that the perceived error actually is an error. Firstly, what a student says or writes can be correct but not the answer the teacher is looking for, for example word choice, the student might use a word the teacher think is inappropriate and therefore marked as an error. Secondly, an error can be something that does not agree with the teacher’s rules. For example, the teacher might expect the student to be specific and not speak about something in general. When the student does not do it the “teacher’s way”, it is marked as an error even though it is not really an error (Tsui, 1995:43).

2.1.3. Should errors be corrected?

Many teachers think that correcting errors is a matter of course. It is believed that if errors are not acknowledged, they will not be avoided the next time either. This is not only believed by teachers, but also by learners who, according to a study made by Cathcart and Olsen in 1976, had a strong preference for being corrected (Tsui, 1995:46). However, one must take into consideration that not all corrections are good corrections. When learning a second language, for example, students go through different stages in the acquisition process. Sometimes they have difficulties learning the language and will only be made more insecure by the corrections. The teacher’s expectations are often
much too high. If students focus too much on the details, they will have difficulties concentrating on the larger and ultimately more important linguistic units in communication. Students must have reached a certain stage in their interlanguage development before they can benefit from corrective feedback (Tsui, 1995:46-48).

2.2. Feedback

Feedback has always been given to learners, but the word itself was not widely used until the middle of the 20th century. At first it was used in the area of computer science and referred to an information process. Nowadays however, it has come to denote a general reaction to what one sees or hears. Since the 1950s, this kind of feedback has been developed and different strategies for giving feedback in a learning context are used more and more frequently (Egidius 2002:248-249). Feedback is important when it comes to acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills. It is usually provided directly and expressions such as *not that way but this way* and *do it again* are often used, especially in schools (School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington; henceforth SLALS).

2.2.1. Feedback in schools

2.2.1.1. The teacher’s role

Teachers have different roles when it comes to feedback. Which role the teacher takes on should depend on where the students are in their project/work. Teachers are not only supposed to be examiners, but also editors helping the students along the way. The teacher can also function as an audience, as a resource for information and guidance or as an evaluator telling students how they did so far. Students tend to see teachers only as examiners and forget all the other important roles they may fulfil, because the teachers are the ones giving the grade (Harmer, 2005:109).

2.2.1.2. The four functions of feedback

According to Race (2005:95), feedback should fulfil four major functions. First, it should help students to give their work meaning. What the students do is supposed to feel
meaningful and not something they do for no reason. Secondly, it should show the need for learning by showing what the students ought to be trying to accomplish. For example, it should show the students that by revising their work, they actually learn things. The third function of feedback is to increase the student’s eagerness to learn, to make them feel that it is important to acquire a certain knowledge; and finally, feedback should inspire the students to develop their skills by means of comments and corrections on their work in school. The students need to be inspired in order to want to continue learning. These functions overlap each other and therefore seem to be much alike.

2.2.1.3. Mitigating feedback

Teachers often try not to be too harsh and direct when giving feedback to students. There are four different strategies that are used most frequently to soften the impact of negative feedback. The first is paired act patterns. This is when the criticism given is combined with either praise or suggestions, in order to soften the comment rather than just giving negative feedback (Hyland& Hyland, 2001:194).

The second strategy for mitigating feedback is to use hedges. These help to tone down criticism and thereby to preserve or establish a positive relationship with the student. Frequently used hedges include words like often, sometimes, rather and a bit. Hedges are not only used in connection with criticism, but also when making suggestions and giving praise. Hedged praise is often a rephrased criticism, which tends to be better for the relationship student-teacher (Hyland& Hyland, 2001:194-195).

A third strategy which is widely used is to add a personal attribution to the feedback. A personal attribution is when the teacher writes, for example: -In my opinion you could improve this section. This, too, is used to soften the criticism. Personifying the feedback gives the student the option to think that others might have a different opinion than the teacher. There might be others who like the essay (Hyland& Hyland, 2001:196-197).

A forth form of mitigation is interrogative syntax, i.e. questions, to weaken the force of a statement. If direct negative feedback is used instead of questions, the students might
consider it as serious accusations by the teacher instead of useful feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:198).

2.2.1.4. Feedback in the L2 classroom

When it comes to second language (L2) learning, as in any other context, feedback can be a great tool. Learning a second language is normally supposed to be a social, interactive process and corrective feedback is one potentially useful aspect of this as it provides the students with the opportunity to compare their own production with that of another person (Ohta Snyder, 2001:134-135).

2.2.1.5. Spoken feedback

In connection with spoken interaction, there may be clarification requests, which is when the teacher points out to the learner that an utterance can be misinterpreted or that there is a mistake in it and it needs to be reformulated. Another option is recasts, which is when the teacher repeats the student’s utterance, but uses the correct form where the error occurred. This does not draw so much attention to the actual error, but focuses on the meaning instead. A third type of spoken feedback in connection with errors is called elicitations, or questions used in order to ask students to change their utterances, e.g.: Can you describe that in more detail? Finally, there is so-called metalinguistic feedback, where teachers point out the errors in an utterance by saying things like: Can you see where you made the mistake? or It should be singular, not plural (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:103-107).

2.2.1.6. Written feedback

Giving written feedback means that the teacher can give individual attention to each student, which is not generally the case in a classroom situation where the teacher may have 30 students to take care of (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:186). Feedback is a great advantage even though it can have a negative effect if the students are confronted with too many corrections. Praise are beneficial in principle, however too much praise can lead to negative effects as well. If the students are given too much positive feedback on their written assignments it risks making them unmotivated to develop further. They
might feel that they already know everything and do not need to strive for knowledge. A teacher needs to know that there are both benefits and negative side effects of feedback (SLALS). If the feedback is given in an appropriate way, students learn from correcting their own mistakes and by doing so they will only have to practise their problem areas and develop their writing instead of practising the things they already know (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:186).

Of course, feedback is only meaningful if the students make use of it. Teachers have to make sure that the students actually look at their feedback and try to correct their mistakes. To get past the fact that students tend to glance only at the grade, the teachers should try to get the students to look at their mistakes there and then and do something about them immediately (Harmer, 2005:110).

2.3. Two previous studies on feedback in the L2 classroom

2.3.1. Sugaring the pill

Hyland & Hyland did a study with students from different countries (2001). They had access to two different English as a second language (ESL) classes and gave feedback on all the students’ assignments during one whole proficiency module. All the assignments with the feedback were well documented and categorised. There were regular observations and interviews in order to see how well the feedback worked. Hyland & Hyland used the following terms to categorise the different types of feedback given: Praise is when the feedback is intended to be positive. Criticism is when the feedback given is negative. This is often a sign of dissatisfaction. Suggestion, finally, is considered more positive than negative. It involves a more or less precise recommendation for improvement and is also sometimes referred to as constructive criticism (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:186-187).

The study showed that teachers who always gave negative feedback tended to cause failure and frustration among students. Teachers who, on the other hand, provided encouraging feedback to students were more likely to produce motivated students who
were eager to learn. This also helped create a friendlier classroom (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:186-187).

Positive feedback can also make the students favour the second language and negative feedback might risk the opposite. Hyland & Hyland also come to the conclusion that if a student does not favour the second language before trying to learn it, s/he will have more difficulties actually acquiring it (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:187).

2.3.2. The Chandler Study

Jean Chandler did a study in 2003 on teacher feedback in order to see how different kinds of feedback affect second language learners. She tested four types of feedback in her investigation and wanted to see what kind would give the best results. The four different types were: underlining, underlining with description, description and correction. Correction meant writing the correct word above the error while description was to label the error in the margin without really saying where the mistake occurred. Underlining, as the name suggests, was simply underlining the mistake without any explanation, and underlining with description was labelling the mistake and showing where the mistake occurred (Chandler, 2003:291).

After the feedback had been given and the students had corrected their mistakes, the essays were compared with one another. Chandler measured how many errors the students had left after the revision and concluded, rather unsurprisingly, that correction was the best kind of feedback. The next best approach was underlining with description. Another interesting result was that different students learned from different kinds of feedback. Some students seemed to learn most from underlining while others learned most from correction. The study also showed that students feel that feedback is important. Even though they might not learn a lot from it, they learn more than they would do if no feedback were given at all. Chandler points out that having the students do something with the teacher’s error correction, besides just receiving, is the most important factor when it comes to the students’ improvement (Chandler, 2003:291).
2.4. Summary

To sum up, feedback is something that has been used in schools for ages, even though not as much as it is today. Many teachers believe that feedback is a good way to promote the acquisition of knowledge, although it does not mean the same thing for all teachers. In second language learning, it generally means to give individual responses to each student, something which can be done in different ways, both in speech and in writing. There have been a number of studies made exploring this area. Some claim that if students are praised, they will become more motivated while negative feedback can have the opposite effect. However, even though praise may be beneficial in principle, one has to be careful, since too much praise can lead to negative effects as well.

3. Method and material

My own investigation was conducted in an upper secondary school with approximately two thousand students in a medium-sized town in central Sweden. The investigation was divided into two parts. In the first part, I had access to 57 student informants, divided into two different classes, both of which had the same English teacher. There were 22 students in grade ten and 35 students in grade eleven. Five of the informants in grade ten were girls and 17 were boys. In grade eleven, eight informants were girls and 27 were boys. When I came after a week to do the second part, there were 21 students present in grade ten and 33 in grade eleven. Some students in these classes were not present due to illness. Nevertheless, the number of participants was deemed more than sufficient for my purposes.

I gave the students an assignment where they were supposed to write a short essay in English which I would correct with four different types of feedback. The idea was to see which type would yield the best results. A questionnaire was also handed out to the students.
3.1. Essays

The students wrote one essay each. I gave them three topics to choose from. They could write about a day in their life, a person they admired, or a place they would like to visit or go back to (See Appendix 1). I asked them to write at least one page each, which all of them did. Both classes got the same instructions.

After the students wrote their essays I corrected them and handed them back with the different types of feedback. Each student got two different types of feedback on their essay, either underlining and correction, or underlining with description and description (Section 2.3.2.). In both classes, I used the two combinations of feedback types for half the class each.

I copied the essays with my feedback on them and handed back the originals to the students, who then corrected them to the best of their ability. They worked individually and were not allowed to help each other. Since my aim was to see which kind of feedback would be most useful, I wanted to see what the writers themselves understood and what they did not.

As it seems after doing the investigation, the students had difficulties in revising the feedback type correction, which is rather surprising. This must be a misunderstanding, which could have made a difference in the result section if I would have given the students clearer instructions.

3.2. Categorisation of errors

In the results section below, I have decided to put the errors into a number of categories: verb form, spelling, prepositions, word choice, and word order. There were a few other types of errors, but due to the small number of instances, I decided to exclude them from my results.

The verb form category includes errors relating to subject-verb agreement, tense, and –ing form. The spelling category includes all types of misspelled words. Preposition errors
are sub-categorised into wrong choice of preposition, missing preposition, and the use of a preposition where there is not supposed to be one. The word choice category includes errors where the student has used a non-existent or inappropriate word. This category also includes missing words or words that should not be there. In the category word order, I have included all wrongly structured sentences.

3.3. Questionnaires

When the essays had been corrected by the students, the students were given a questionnaire about feedback (Appendix 2). There were six questions to answer, two of which were multiple-choice questions and the other four open.

The students answered questions about all feedback types, even though they had not seen all the types in their essays. In order for them to be able to do this, I explained the different types to the students before they answered the questions.

The purpose with the questionnaire was to see what the students thought about feedback and the different types I had given them. I wanted them to write what type they thought was the best type and why they thought so, so I could compare this with the outcome of the essay-writing task. I was also interested in seeing the students’ general thoughts about feedback and how they preferred to get it.

Not all the students who had participated in part one of the study were present on the day when the questionnaires were handed out. In grade ten, one student was absent, and in grade eleven, two students were absent. This means that the number of students answering the questionnaire was 21 in grade ten and 33 in grade eleven.

4. Analysis and results

In the following sections I will present the results of the students’ essays and the questionnaires. I will present the results for both classes in the same sections and with the
help of tables. I will also make a comparison of the two classes in order to see if there are any differences.

4.1. Essays

After the students had written their essays, I corrected them. There were a lot of errors, though I did not mark all of them in every paper. Some of the students suffered from dyslexia and in those cases, I did not want to point out every spelling mistake they had made. The 22 students in grade ten made 254 errors all in all, or 11.5 per student on average, and the 34 students in grade eleven made 328 errors all in all, or 9.5 per student on average. In the next sections I will show how many errors received which type of feedback and how many of the errors were corrected by the students. I will also give examples of sentences from the essays both before and after they were revised by the students, in order to illustrate how I marked the different feedback types. First I will present the results for grade ten and then for grade eleven, in section 4.1.6 there will be a comparison between the two classes.

4.1.1. Underlining

This type of feedback is simply underlining the error with no further information.

Grade ten:
All in all the students made 78 errors that received this feedback type and they managed to correct 44 of them. The feedback type underlining thus yielded good results. Table 1 provides more details.

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1 The teacher pointed out which of them who suffered from dyslexia.
Table 1. Results for underlining in grade ten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected Errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that underlining works best for prepositions. But one has to take into consideration that there were only 7 preposition errors and a lot more spelling and verb errors. Underlining worked quite well for spelling too, even though the percentage of appropriate changes was not as high. Underlining worked least well with verb mistakes, which probably means that the students have difficulties with verbs and how to correct them.

Example:
“At 8.40 I pak my bags and brush my teeths ang get ready to go.”
This was revised to:
“At 8.40 I pack my bags and brush my teeth and get ready to go.”

The student who wrote this was able correct all his/her mistakes just by having the errors underlined.

Grade eleven:
The students in grade eleven made 62 errors that were marked with underlining. 46 errors were corrected, which shows that underlining worked even better in this class than in grade ten. Table 2 shows what types of errors the students made and how many of them there were corrected properly by them.
Table 2. Results for underlining in grade eleven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that over 60% of the errors were corrected in all categories. *Word choice* was the category to where underlining worked best, as 8 errors out of ten were corrected. Even though I had not pointed out whether a word was missing or whether they had used an inappropriate word, the students managed to correct most errors anyway. It seems that most students in grade eleven understood what mistake they had made, simply by seeing the word underlined.

Example:

“I walk down the stairs and saw my familie eating breakfast.”

This was revised to:

“I walk down the stairs and saw my family eating breakfast.”

The student who wrote this was not able to correct all his/her errors. The feedback type underlining did not provide his/her enough information to be able to correct all of them.

4.1.2. Underlining with description

This type of feedback consists of underlining the error at the same time as the kind of error is described in the margin.

Grade ten

Fewer errors received this kind of feedback. Of the 51 errors made, 41 were corrected. Only ten errors were revised in a wrong way or not at all. Table 3 shows how the errors were distributed and where the students had most difficulties correcting their errors.
Table 3. Results for underlining with description in grade ten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This feedback type seems to work well for grade ten. As we can see, many errors have been corrected in each category. According to the percentages, word choice was the category the students understood and corrected best. There were only 9 errors made within this category; however, and one can say that underlining with description worked very well when it comes to spelling too, even though four of the errors were not corrected in this category.

Example:
“A place I whant to visit igan is London.” spelling + spelling
This was revised to:
“A place I want to visit again is London.”

The feedback type underlining with description worked very well in this case, since both spelling mistakes were correctly revised.

Grade eleven
In this class as many as 80 errors were marked with underlining and description. This method worked well in this class too, since they managed to correct 67 of their errors. In Table 4, the results are shown.
Table 4. Results for underlining with description in grade eleven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results here are a bit mixed. It is a good result overall, even though the feedback worked better for some categories than others. Here, the category *word choice* was apparently easy to correct. All of the errors I had marked were found and corrected by the students. As this class had quite a few errors when it came to word choice, a hundred percent result here is encouraging. As with underlining, the most common errors were in *spelling*, which the students succeeded quite well in finding and correcting too.

Example:

“It was about 4 years ago I went there with my parents and my little sister.”  Word order

This was revised to:

“I went there about 4 years ago with my parents and my little sister.”

This student managed to correct this sentence by getting the feedback type underlining with description; the word order was revised correctly.

4.1.3. Description

This type of feedback consists of describing the error in the margin, but without underlining it. The students had to find the error themselves.

Grade ten

All in all only 38 errors received the feedback type description in this class. 23 of the errors were corrected by the students, which is a little more than half. Table 5 below shows how the errors were distributed over the different categories.
Table 5. Results for description in grade ten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results for description are not as easy to interpret as those for the other types of feedback. In some categories, description worked quite well, such as verbs, spelling and word choice. It apparently did not work as well in the categories prepositions and word order. However, it should be kept in mind that the percentages are based on as few as seven errors combined. The largest category was word choice errors, and of those 67% were revised correctly.

Example:
“I am usually there in Christmas.”  preposition
This was revised to: (or more not revised)
“I am usually there in Christmas”

The feedback type description was not enough for this student to be able to correct his error. He would have needed more information to be able to do the correction.

Grade eleven
In grade eleven 98 errors were made where the feedback type description was used. 47 of the errors were corrected, which is less than 50%. Table 6 shows how many errors each category had and how often they were corrected.
Table 6. Results for description in grade eleven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This feedback type does not seem to have worked very well in this class. It worked best when it came to verbs and spelling, but not as well for prepositions, word choice and word order. For example, there were 21 errors in word choice, and only six of them were corrected.

Example:

“After a long day at the city we ate pastries on our hotel.” preposition + preposition

This was revised to:

“After a long day in the city we ate pastries at our hotel.”

This student managed to correct his/her preposition errors only by receiving the feedback type description.

4.1.4. Correction

The feedback type correction consists of giving the students the correct answer by writing it above the error.

Grade ten

The grade ten class made 87 errors that received this last type of feedback, and 50 of them were corrected. Since the correct answer was given, one could think that the share should have been higher. Table 7 shows how the errors were distributed and how many were corrected by the students.
Table 7. Results for correction in grade ten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As one can see in Table 7, many uncorrected errors relate to verbs. Even though the right form was written above the error, many of the students did not change their verbs. This may have several explanations. Either the students did not care enough to spend time on changing their paper, or they thought the teacher's correction was enough. It might also be the case that they did not agree with the feedback and therefore did not change their text. It could also have been that my instructions were unclear and that the students simply did not understand that they were supposed to change it, due to the fact that the correct answer was already on their essay. Perhaps they felt that there was no need for them to change anything. Most of the other uncorrected errors were related to prepositions and word choice. Correcting the spelling was easy for the students; most of the errors were corrected.

Example:

\[
\text{had} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{it}
\]

“I haved a pizza with mushrooms on.”
This was revised to: (or not revised to)
“I haved a pizza with mushrooms on.”

The student did not change anything in the sentence. Even though the correct answer was given, nothing was revised.
Grade eleven

In grade eleven 88 errors were marked with the feedback type correction. 50 of those errors were corrected by the students. Table 8 shows what kinds of errors were made and how many were corrected.

Table 8. Results for correction in grade eleven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Corrected errors</th>
<th>Percent corrections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 shows us that word choice was the best category for using correction in grade eleven. It works for spelling too, but not as well for prepositions, word order and verbs. The worst category is prepositions, where the students in grade eleven only corrected 20% of the errors. This is probably due to the same reasons as those outlined in connection with the results for grade ten.

Example:

*competed athletics*

“When I was younger I compete in Athletics.”

This was revised to:

“When I was younger I competed in Athletics.”

This student managed to include my corrections. S/he changed what I had made comments on.

4.1.5. Comparison

Both classes had similar results. They have the same English teacher and are used to the same feedback types. Still I thought it was interesting to see if there would be any
differences between them. A number of circumstances can influence the results and I wanted to make sure that they were valid.

As for underlining, both classes had good results when it came to correcting the errors, even though grade eleven had a higher percentage than grade ten. Prepositions seemed the easiest to correct for grade ten while word choice was the category that was easiest to correct for grade eleven. Both classes had difficulties correcting word order on the basis of just underlining, which suggests that they would have needed more information in these cases. They simply did not as yet have the necessary knowledge. But all in all it seems as if all students understood most of the time what errors to correct and how to correct them, just by seeing the word underlined.

For underlining with description the results did not differ much either. Both classes had very good results when it came to word choice. In grade ten, 89% of the errors were corrected, while 100% were corrected in grade eleven. This feedback also worked well with all the other categories where the percentage of errors correctly revised did not go under 60% in any of the categories in any of the classes. The most common errors that were underlined and described in both classes were spelling errors, which both classes corrected very well.

When it came to the feedback type description, there were some differences between the classes. Grade ten managed to correct spelling, verbs and word choice pretty well, but did not succeed in correcting most word order and prepositions. Consequently the percentage was very low. This could be due to the fact that preposition errors were very few all in all. In grade eleven description worked well for verbs and spelling, but not well at all for word choice, word order and prepositions. Word choice in this class only got a percentage of 29% as compared to 67% in grade ten.

When it came to correction the classes differed with respect to some of their results. Both classes did quite well correcting spelling mistakes. They saw the correction and used it in the right way. But both classes had problems with changing the prepositions. Grade
eleven was better at correcting verbs and word choice than grade ten. Both classes had much lower percentages than expected since they were actually given the correct answers above their errors.

4.2. Questionnaires

After all the essays had been given back and corrected I talked a little about the different feedback types I had used. I then handed the students a questionnaire with six questions about feedback (Appendix 2). I will, in the sections below, show the results of this questionnaire. I will not distinguish the classes from one another since I do not think that this would be relevant for this study. I have decided not to analyze question 6 in the questionnaire, since I think it is not relevant for my investigation.

4.2.1. What is feedback?

There were a lot of different answers to this question and I will discuss it further with the help of quotations. Because many students had similar answers I will just present the most common and a few particularly thoughtful ones. All quotes here are written in English as they were written by the students.

“Different ways of correcting tests on”
Many of the students wrote something like this, which is not really strange, since different types of corrections or error treatments had been discussed just before the questionnaire was handed out. Most of them who wrote this did not explain it further.

“Help for pupils to increase their skill in English or other classes, after a test or writing.” and “Something to work with, correct and learn from.”
A few students developed the first thought by writing that the corrections made in school were there for the students to actually learn something. They wrote that the point of feedback is to improve, not just to know what is wrong.
“A Help to help yourself”
The student who wrote this insightful comment added that feedback should not be there to annoy the students or just because the teacher likes to make marks on the students’ papers; it should be there to help the students to improve their skills.

“A sort of guideline”
The student who wrote this thinks that feedback should be seen as a guideline instead of a correction, i.e. that one can choose to use the feedback given instead of seeing it as the only correct answer.

“Critic”
A few of the students seem to believe that feedback is only there to show what mistakes they make and for the teacher to tell them what s/he dislikes. They wrote that they did not see feedback as containing any positive comments, just as negative criticism.

4.2.2. Is feedback important or not?
Even here there were a lot of different answers. Some students connected this question to question 1, while others saw it as a whole new question. Most of the students saw feedback as very important; just a few of them thought that it was not important. I will present the results with the help of quotations here as well.

“If you don’t get feedback, you will continue doing that mistake.”
Many students wrote this, which shows that they want to learn. They want to develop and believe that feedback can help them. They feel that if they do not know what mistakes they make, they will make them again and again.

“You learn from your mistakes”
This view was also popular among the students. Many of them believe that if you make a mistake you can learn from it and avoid it the next time. They felt that it is better to be allowed to make mistakes and correct them instead of just having them pointed out and
not doing anything about them. They wrote that if you work with your mistakes, you will learn.

“Feels good to get response”
A few of the students commented on how it felt for them to get feedback and error correction. They wrote that without feedback they would not know if anyone actually read their paper or test. Getting feedback on their work made them feel special in that someone actually cared enough to read it through.

“If the critic is positive, it could also raise my confidence.”
The student who wrote this practically talks about similar things as the students represented by the previous quote. But he also explains how his confidence rises when someone tells him that he did something well.

“Not so important.”
A few of the students did not think feedback was especially important. They never looked at it anyway. They did not see feedback as any type of help for them, rather as something a teacher wants to give.

4.2.3. Did you get enough feedback to be able to correct your errors in this essay?

Almost all of the students thought they got enough feedback on the essay they wrote to be able to correct their errors. 52 of the students answered this question and 49 thought they got enough feedback while only three persons did not agree.

4.2.4. Which feedback is the best type?

The results for this question will be presented with the help of a table.
Table 9. Feedback types preferred by the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Type</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underlining</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlining with description</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, underlining with description is preferred over the other types by most students. The least popular feedback type is description, and the other two types, underlining and correction, are almost equal in popularity.

4.2.5. Why do you think this feedback type is the best type?

Quotations below each feedback type will represent the results here. Since the students were allowed to use Swedish or English, a few of the quotations below are translated by me. In those cases I have put my translation in brackets after the quotation.

Underlining:

“You should look yourself. You learn the most then.”

“So you can correct your mistakes on your own” (my translation)

“Shows what’s wrong, but you don’t have the correct answer.”

“I want to figure out my own mistakes.” (my translation)

Underlining with description:

“Find the correct answer yourself, but help on the way.”

“To see what the teacher thinks about the person.”

“Chance to understand it yourself.”

“You learn if you find out for yourself.” (my translation)

“If it’s a mistake and you really know the word it feels better to show that.”

“Don’t have to look, but learn by yourself.”

“Very good guiding of what to do.”

“You learn more” (my translation)

“The most obvious way to learn.” (my translation)
Description:
“You can look yourself”
“An explanation is good so you know what is wrong.” (my translation)

Correction:
“Not to do the same mistake again.”
“I think you remember it best”
“I know what I have done wrong.” (my translation)
“Easy to use and I see how words are spelled” (my translation)

5. Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to look into what different researchers say about feedback and errors, especially in schools, and to carry out a study of my own, where I investigate different types of feedback in written essays. My investigation was conducted in two classes in an upper secondary school in Sweden, which both had the same teacher. My aim was to see what type of feedback would be understood best and which would be most useful for the students. I also wanted to find out if the results reflected their preferences, which is why I had them both write an essay, and fill out a questionnaire.

The feedback type underlining worked well for the students. 57 percent of the errors made by the students in grade ten were corrected successfully and 74 percent of the errors in grade eleven. Grade ten had a lot more errors than grade eleven when it came to underlining. It is not clear whether the students who did not correct their errors did not know how to do it. Underlining was not particularly popular among the students. Most of them preferred underlining in connection with description, though a few thought underlining could work alone as well. The few who preferred underlining explained that underlining was the only type where they actually got to find the error themselves. They did not know what the error was, but this was their chance to show themselves and the
teacher that they actually were able to revise the error, without help from anyone.

The second type of feedback used was underlining with description. In grade ten, 81 percent of the errors marked this way were corrected, and in grade eleven the result was even better: 84% of the errors were successfully eliminated. Almost all of the students in both classes who got this type of feedback managed to revise all their errors. Word choice seemed to be easiest to correct when this feedback type was used and word order and prepositions most difficult. This type was also the feedback type that the majority of the students thought was the best and the type they believed they learned the most from. The reasons why the students believed that it was the best type were many, but most of the students thought that underlining with description meant being guided to the correct answer, instead of just getting it. They thought it was good to actually look the right form up themselves and the results show that this proved a successful strategy.

The third feedback type used was description, which did not work quite as well, even though some students liked this type the best. Grade ten managed to correct 61 percent of the errors made and grade eleven only 47. Description worked quite well with spelling, but the students had problems when it came to the other categories. This can be due to the fact that spelling mistakes can be easy to identify compared to other categories and therefore this type of feedback demanded too much work, which the students were not prepared to do. This was also the feedback type that was least popular. Only two persons preferred this type, because they liked to have something to challenge them.

The last feedback type was correction. It worked almost equally well in both classes: 57 and 58 percent successful revisions respectively. It was surprising that it did not work better though, since the students got the correct answers from me. It might have been too easy for them, which can be the reason for them not revising their errors in some cases. They might have felt that it was unnecessary to revise something that was already corrected, which is why I believe that the students do not learn anything from correction only. It could also be that my instructions were unclear and that the students simply did
not understand them. 8 students thought the feedback type *correction* worked best because they could be sure what the mistake as well as the right form were and could then avoid making the same mistake again.

The previous studies mentioned in my background (section 2.3.) were useful for my investigation. The study made by Chandler (2003) is similar to mine and the results of that study are comparable to mine. Chandler’s study (2003) included essay writing and questionnaires as well. She used the same feedback types, but she got a slightly different result. The best feedback type in Chandler’s study was correction, though correction did not work at all in same way for me. Her second best type was underlining with description which was my best type. She came to the conclusion that different students learn in different ways, just as I did. Unlike Chandler, however, I found that underlining with description worked well for almost all students receiving that type. The investigation also showed that feedback can make students feel better and that some of them like the teachers’ positive comments as well as error corrections. This is similar to what Hyland & Hyland (2001) suggest in their investigation, that informants feel that praise gives them confidence and that feedback in general is mostly something they enjoy and think is helpful. This also agrees with the four functions of feedback; one of the functions is to motivate and inspire students (Race, 2005: 95-96).

The students were devoted to their tasks, which is why I believe that the study is valid. It was quite surprising to see that most students actually thought that the feedback type underlining with description was best. It shows that they have some understanding of what feedback is all about. It also shows that students see the teacher as more than just the one giving the grade. The students also recognize all the other important roles a teacher can play.

If I were to do this study again, there are some things I would do differently. I would ask the students more questions about the different feedback types; I would ask them to rank the types and explain in which different ways they believed that each feedback type worked best. It would also have been interesting to get the teacher's point of view.
However, the limitations of a term paper make it impossible to cover all aspects that would be of interest. But these could be considered in future investigations.

To sum up, all students do not work in the same way. Most of the students like the feedback given and the fact that they are given error corrections on their work. Most of them preferred underlining with description, but not all. For some of the students, this type did not work best either. Being a teacher means that one has to take into consideration that all students work differently; people learn in different ways. Therefore it is difficult and perhaps a bit dangerous to say that one type is best. I believe that this study shows how feedback can take many forms and work well for different people, even though underlining with description seems to work well for most.
References


Appendix 1

Choose one of the topics below and write at least one page about it. Choose the topic you feel you can write the most about.

- Write about a person you admire and explain why? Do you know this person and in that case, how do you know him/her? What is so special about this person?

- Write about a place you would like to visit or go back to. Explain why you would like to go there and what is so special about this place? What can you do there?

- Write about a day in your life. What did you do this day and who was with you?
Appendix 2

Please answer all the questions. In the case of multiple-choice questions, circle your answers. In connection with the open questions, try to explain as well as you can.

1. **What is feedback to you?**

2. **Do you think it is important to get feedback? Explain why you think it is important/not important.**

3. **Do you think that you got enough feedback to be able to correct your errors in this essay?**

   Yes          No

4. **What kind of feedback do you think is the best?**

   Underlining   Underlining with description   Description
   Correction

   Other suggestion:

5. **Why do you think this kind of feedback is the best?**

6. **Does your teacher give you enough and the right kind of feedback on written assignments? If not, explain how it could be improved.**