

# The effect of unfocused indirect written corrective feedback on errors

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the effects of unfocused indirect written corrective feedback on students' writing. A total of 67 Finnish upper secondary students wrote two essays during an English course and revised them according to teacher feedback. The results show that the most common error types were in the use of articles, prepositions, verb forms, and spelling. The students made fewer errors in the second essay, and particularly the number of errors related to articles decreased. Interview data from six students indicated a positive attitude to unfocused indirect written corrective feedback as it made students active agents in their own learning process. A takeaway for English teachers is that they should provide unfocused indirect written corrective feedback to accelerate students' language learning.

*Keywords:* corrective feedback, grammar, teaching of English, upper secondary education

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tarkastella fokusoimattoman epäsuoran kirjallisen korjaavan palautteen vaikutusta opiskelijoiden kirjoittamiseen. 67 suomalaista lukiolaista kirjoitti kaksi kirjoitelmaa englannin kurssilla ja korjasi ne opettajan palautteen mukaisesti. Tulosten mukaan tyypilliset virheet liittyivät artikkeleihin, prepositioihin, verbimuotoihin ja oikeinkirjoitukseen. Lukiolaiset tekivät vähemmän virheitä jälkimmäisessä kirjoitelmassa, ja erityisesti artikkelivirheet vähenivät. Kuuden lukiolaisen haastatteluaineistosta välittyi myönteinen suhtautuminen fokusoimattomaan epäsuoraan kirjalliseen korjaavaan palautteeseen, sillä se teki opiskelijoista aktiivisia toimijoita omassa oppimisprosessissaan. Englannin opettajien näkökulmasta tulokset osoittavat, että heidän kannattaa antaa fokusoimatonta epäsuoraa kirjallista korjaavaa palautetta, jotta he voivat tukea opiskelijoiden kielenoppimista.

*Avainsanat:* korjaava palaute, kielioppi, englannin opetus, lukio

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## Introduction

The main aim of this study was to explore the use of unfocused indirect written corrective feedback (henceforth, WCF) in an English as a foreign language course in Finland. In foreign language teaching, providing feedback to students is a prominent feature of high-quality instruction. The feedback provided by language teachers is frequently referred to as corrective feedback (Lee, 2019). By providing corrective feedback, the teacher indicates that the student has used an incorrect linguistic form (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The significance of formative assessment is prevalent in language education in Finland (FNBE, 2019). From the perspective of English teachers, this means that diverse formative assessment practices, such as self-assessment, peer assessment and feedback, should be implemented into teaching. Over the past few years, feedback has received greater attention in Finnish research on language teaching. The focus has been on investigating feedback through students' lenses, in other words, through students' perceptions. However, the number of studies on specific types of corrective feedback are limited. For instance, research on unfocused WCF is nascent in Finland and also around the world; a considerable amount of research has explored focused WCF, but few studies have explored the effects of unfocused WCF on language proficiency (Karim & Nassaji, 2020). Therefore, the main objective of this study was to enlighten both researchers and English teachers about the effects of unfocused indirect WCF on learning English. The research questions were: 1) What grammatical errors do Finnish upper secondary students make in English writing? 2) How does providing unfocused indirect WCF affect the number of errors in upper secondary students' essays? 3) How do upper secondary students perceive unfocused indirect WCF?

## Written corrective feedback

Research on corrective feedback abounds; researchers have been engaged in determining what type of WCF accelerates learning, how students and teachers perceive WCF, and what WCF practices occur in foreign language teaching. However, the responses to these perennial questions seem to be elusive and even conflicting. Despite the lack of overall consensus, several meta-analyses (e.g., Brown et al., 2023; Kang & Han, 2015; Li, 2010) have indeed shown that WCF enhances various aspects of language learning, such as grammatical accuracy and spelling. Nevertheless, meta-analyses usually have different foci, which makes the comparison of the results somewhat challenging (Brown et al., 2023). It is also imperative to bear in mind that despite the usefulness of feedback, students do not always appropriate the WCF from teachers (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019).

WCF can be either direct or indirect. If the teacher provides the student with the correct form, the feedback is direct; if the teacher instead points out that the student has made an error but does not provide the correct form, the feedback is indirect (Karim & Nassaji, 2020). Indirect feedback can be provided in a variety of fashions. For example, the teacher can highlight the location of the error or merely indicate that the student has made an error but not show its precise location (Ellis, 2009). To foster learning, several studies have indicated that students should correct their errors based on the feedback provided by the teacher because it activates students and engages them in problem solving (e.g., Ferris 2004, 2006). In contrast, some studies have also suggested that direct feedback can enhance learning and that correcting one's errors can be particularly arduous for intermediate learners (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Sinha & Nassaji, 2022; Zhang & Cheng, 2021). Admittedly, low-achieving students might not possess the competence required to correct their errors (Ferris, 2004). Despite these results, direct feedback can enhance grammar learning if it is combined with written languaging (Nicolás-Conesa et al., 2019), which means "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 98).

Scholars differentiate between errors and mistakes. Errors are systematic and persistent, indicating a misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge, while mistakes do not stem from a lack of knowledge; rather, they are primarily occasional and unsystematic (Nassaji, 2015). Further, errors can be classified as treatable and untreatable. Some non-idiomatic errors, such as unnecessary words or missing words, are more difficult for students to correct on their own than errors related to verb forms or subject-verb agreement (Ferris, 1999). Therefore, the distinction between mistakes and errors, as well as between treatable and untreatable errors, may provide a rationale for the choice of the directness of WCF (Ferris, 1999; Nassaji, 2015). However, given the complex nature of direct and indirect WCF, it is challenging to examine what type of feedback is 'the best' (Ellis, 2009).

In addition to the distinction described above, another typical division is made between focused and unfocused feedback. The former refers to feedback that focuses on a particular language issue (such as the use of adjectives), while the latter refers to feedback on all types of errors (Karim & Nassaji, 2020). Put differently, focused feedback is intensive and unfocused feedback is extensive (Ellis, 2009). Moreover, research findings on focused and unfocused feedback are conflicting. On the one hand, di Gennaro and Ekiert's (2021) study suggests that unfocused feedback improves students' grammatical accuracy, while the effects of focused feedback are merely minor. On the other hand, Frear and Chiu (2015), Ellis et al. (2008), and Karim and Nassaji (2020) argue that both focused and unfocused feedback boost learning. Furthermore, Ellis (2009) argues that unfocused feedback might be more difficult for the student given the complexity of correcting various grammatical errors and processing corrections. Likewise, Lee (2019) points

out that unfocused WCF can be overwhelming for the student. However, unfocused WCF might be more suitable for advanced students as less advanced students who are still developing their writing skills usually make more errors (Lee, 2019). These inconsistent results in terms of direct and indirect as well as focused and unfocused feedback accentuate the intricate nature of WCF.

## Methodology

### Participants and context

A total of 67 upper secondary students participated in this study. The students were in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (3<sup>rd</sup> grade in the Finnish system). In this grade, students are 18–19 years old. Basic education in Finland takes nine years, after which students habitually continue their educational path in either upper secondary or vocational education. Students generally complete upper secondary education in three years.

The students had completed the mandatory six English courses, each lasting approximately six or seven weeks. They were enrolled in an optional course when the study was undertaken. The teacher of the course had extensive experience (over 20 years) in teaching English at the upper secondary level. In line with di Gennaro and Ekiert (2021), this study was carried out in a classroom to increase ecological validity and to approximate existent practices in English teaching. This will further the discussion on the implications of the results for English teachers.

Research permission was obtained from the municipality and the school prior to commencing the study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and privacy notices including essential information on the study were distributed to students at school. Anonymity was considered at all stages of the study.

### Data collection and analysis

The dataset in this study consists of English essays from 67 students and interviews with six of them. The data were collected from upper secondary students in the autumn term of 2022. Each student wrote two essays during this seven-week course, approximately two weeks apart. Therefore, the data comprised 134 essays.

On both occasions, the students were given several topics from which they could choose their individual essay topic. For example, the topics included writing about a childhood memory, military service, or what students had learnt during their years at school. The essays were to be 700–1,300 characters long, which is the length used in the (optional) English test in the matriculation examination at the end of upper secondary education.

For each essay, the English teacher provided unfocused indirect WCF. She used a list of 15 types of errors: article, verb form, preposition, spelling, incorrect word, word order, word missing, genitive, plural, unclear meaning, comma, to before an infinitive, singular, subject, and indirect question. In Finnish, sentences can sometimes omit an explicit subject, making the category of subject particularly relevant for Finnish students.

If a student made an error, the teachers underlined the erroneous form and used codes (e.g., ‘A’ for article, ‘G’ for genitive) to indicate what type of error the student had made. Based on the feedback, the students corrected their errors and submitted a revised version of the text. The students were allowed to use additional resources, such as books and the Internet, during the revision process. They could also ask for help from peers or the teacher.

An assessment scale from 4 (failed) to 10 (excellent) is used in Finnish schools. To provide richer information, six students of various proficiency levels were interviewed to explore students’ perceptions of unfocused indirect WCF. The students were interviewed individually in Finnish, which was the students’ mother tongue, because the purpose of the interview was not to assess students’ oral skills in communicating in English. Rather, the purpose was to explore their perceptions of unfocused indirect WCF. It was also probable that students would express themselves more fluently and effortlessly in their mother tongue than in a foreign language. Background information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

<b>pseudonym</b>	<b>previous course grade</b>	<b>number of completed English courses</b>	<b>motivation to study English</b>
Everly	5 (adequate)	8	high
Maya	6 (moderate)	9	high
Ariana	7 (satisfactory)	8	high
Peyton	8 (good)	10	high
Samantha	9 (very good)	9	high
June	10 (excellent)	10	limited

Table 1. Interviewees.

As shown in Table 1, the interviewees had completed several English courses, and all but one student was motivated to study English. However, as June had taken ten courses, it suggests that she was motivated to study English. Moreover, all the interviewees were female. The length of the interview was 20–25 minutes per student.

The essays were analysed quantitatively. The number of errors in each essay was calculated and compared using percentages. Concerning the interviews, they were analysed by inductive content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The interview data were coded and subsequently grouped

thematically. Direct quotes, translated from Finnish to English, and examples of students' errors have been provided to illustrate the results.

## Results

### Types of errors in students' essays

The results of this paper will primarily relate to the aspect of directness. The first research question asked what type of errors Finnish upper secondary students make in English writing. In the two essays that each student wrote, they made 757 errors. The types of errors are described in Table 2.

type of error	frequency (%)
article	28
verb form	17
preposition	17
spelling	13
incorrect word	9
word order	4
word missing	3
genitive	2
plural	2
unclear meaning	2
comma	1
to before an infinitive	1
singular	1
subject	0
indirect question	0

Table 2. Frequencies of errors in students' (N=67) essays.

From the data in Table 2, it is apparent that the most difficult grammatical structure for the students was the use of articles. Moreover, verb forms, prepositions and spelling were also challenging. In contrast, writing indirect questions and using a subject in a sentence were unchallenging for the students. Examples of students' erroneous sentences are provided below:

1. Human is social animal who need's people around.
2. Some of those skills being even more important and useful than ability to read and write properly.
3. Today's topic deal with how encounter troubles with speaking English as a second language.

These examples illustrate typical errors the students made. For example, these errors included articles, verb forms, and spelling.

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The second research question focused on how providing unfocused indirect WCF affects the number of errors in students’ essays. Table 3 displays the distribution of errors.

type of error	essay 1 (%)	essay 2 (%)
article	31	25
verb form	17	16
preposition	13	20
spelling	13	13
incorrect word	9	9
word missing	4	3
word order	3	4
genitive	2	2
plural	2	2
comma	2	1
to before an infinitive	2	1
unclear meaning	1	2
singular	1	1
indirect question	0	0
subject	0	1
number of all errors	410	347

Table 3. Comparison of errors in students’ (N=67) essays.

As shown in Table 3, a comparison of the two essays reveals that the unfocused indirect WCF given decreased the number of students’ errors in general as the students made 63 fewer errors in the second essay compared to the first. More specifically, the students made fewer errors with several grammatical structures, such as articles, verb forms and missing words. Nevertheless, the unfocused indirect WCF given did not appear to affect several grammatical issues, such as spelling, using incorrect words, or use of the genitive. The most significant difference was in article use, for which the difference was six percentage points. Interestingly, the students struggled more with prepositions in the second essay, the difference between the essays here being seven percentage points.

## How students perceived unfocused indirect written corrective feedback

The third research question aimed at exploring students' perceptions of unfocused indirect WCF. A recurrent theme in the interviews was a positive attitude to it. All the students highlighted that at a general level, indirect WCF is conducive to language learning. June mentioned:

It's always better from the point of view of learning if you use like problem solving and personal thinking instead of just getting the correct answer. So, from the point of view of learning, I think it's a good thing [that the teacher provides unfocused indirect WCF]. (June)

As June mentioned, correcting one's own errors enhances reflection and learning in general. Similarly, the students found unfocused WCF to support language learning. Ariana put it as follows:

I think it supports language learning because it makes you more aware of your own proficiency, allowing you to understand what you need to focus on more in the future. (Ariana)

Ariana's response suggests that unfocused WCF increases students' awareness of their proficiency. Similarly, in terms of the positive aspects of unfocused indirect WCF, the other students pointed out that they had become aware of recurrent errors in their essays, what types of errors they had made, and what they needed to focus more on in subsequent essays. They had also learnt to use grammatical structures and to express themselves more fluently. However, the students underscored that correcting one's errors with teacher feedback can be more demanding for weaker students. Samantha discussed:

I can imagine that for those students who have low skills in English, correcting the errors can be difficult. It can be really challenging. (Samantha)

As described by Samantha, students' rudimentary skills in English might hinder the correction of one's errors. In terms of initial reactions after receiving the essays with teacher feedback, most students mentioned that their reactions had been neutral or positive. However, Everly underscored that sometimes she had felt discouraged. She said:

Sometimes when I get the essay back, I wonder if I ever learn these issues, whether there's any sense in correcting the errors. But gradually I start to correct them, and it usually goes well. (Everly)

Even though Everly's initial reaction might be discouraging, she is able to start correcting the errors. She also commented on the unfocused aspect, mentioning that it could facilitate gradual improvement as she engaged with



and applied the corrections. When asked what the students actually do after receiving their paper back, they mentioned similar practices: They started to analyse each error, and using the codes given by the teacher, they pondered alternative forms. If they were unable to correct the erroneous form, they asked a peer or the teacher for guidance. They also used books and additional materials. Peyton explained:

Well, I always ask the teacher to help me if there's something unclear, like what the error was. Then the teacher usually gives tips. ... She might say that this isn't necessarily wrong, but I could say it in a better way. (Peyton)

It is apparent in Peyton's extract that the teacher points the students in the right direction if they are unable to correct a certain error and might also provide additional feedback on the text. Furthermore, the students were asked whether they preferred indirect WCF to direct WCF. All the students underscored that indirect WCF was superior to direct WCF. They explained that if they received the essay with the corrections, they would not engage with the errors systematically. Maya illustrated this point:

I think I would only glance at the paper and wouldn't examine it more closely. I think I wouldn't learn so much because I hadn't done the work [the corrections]. (Maya)

As Maya pointed out, direct WCF might make students inert as they are not required to take responsibility of the corrections. Therefore, indirect WCF seems to activate students more than direct WCF. However, the students mentioned that to some extent, direct WCF can also stimulate language learning. Ariana pointed out:

It [direct WCF] can have positive effects too because then you wouldn't correct the error wrongly thinking that it's actually correct. (Ariana)

As Ariana mentioned, students might not correct the errors flawlessly. As a result, they could consider erroneous forms to be correct. Regarding focused and unfocused WCF, the students opted for unfocused WCF. Maya had the following to say:

I think it's better if the teacher provides feedback on all errors. It helps maintain other skills as well. Even if, for example, only verbs were studied during this course, the other aspects would still stay in mind. (Maya)

Maya's response indicates that unfocused WCF contributes to the maintenance of other language skills.

## Discussion

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of unfocused indirect WCF in learning English grammar in Finnish upper secondary education. This study yields several practical implications for developing the teaching of English. First, unfocused indirect WCF clearly led to a decrease in the number of errors in students' essays. To help students learn and internalise grammar rules, it appears that English teachers should opt for providing unfocused indirect WCF. As Finnish upper secondary students have studied English for many years and many of them have attained an advanced level, unfocused indirect WCF could be an instructive way of providing feedback (Lee, 2019). In terms of grammatical structures, this type of feedback notably affected the number of errors with articles. Put simply, unfocused indirect WCF appears to be a powerful tool for enhancing the use of articles in English. This result corroborates the findings of previous research on the effectiveness of unfocused indirect WCF and WCF in general (Brown et al., 2023; di Gennaro & Ekiert, 2021; Kang & Han, 2015; Karim & Nassaji, 2020; Li, 2010).

Second, although the overall number of errors decreased in students' essays, the errors with prepositions increased substantially in the second essay. One explanation lies in the fact that article use is systematic while prepositions have much less systematicity. Therefore, it is doubtless more challenging for the student to choose the correct preposition. A solution to this dilemma could be to provide additional teaching about prepositions and distribute additional self-study materials on prepositions to students. Moreover, the teacher can provide more oral feedback on prepositions for students when they are revising their texts in the classroom.

Third, the students perceived unfocused indirect WCF as advantageous for learning English. They stressed that it activates them and makes them take more responsibility for learning. However, low-achieving students might face problems with self-corrections due to their limited language proficiency. This is in line with previous studies (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Sinha & Nassaji, 2022). Thus, English teachers should place a greater emphasis on teaching self-editing strategies. This would also unequivocally help high-achieving students as they might learn new strategies for error correction. In addition, teachers could provide tangible instructions on the steps involved in self-correction and what the students can do if they are unable to correct some errors. For example, teachers can promote peer collaboration as an effective means of facilitating self-corrections.

Fourth, based on the two essays, the most challenging issues for the students were the use of articles, verb forms, prepositions, and spelling. This result denotes a clear need for focusing on these issues in English lessons. The rules regarding particularly prepositions and articles are nuanced and require a great deal of time for students to fully internalise them. Hence, the

aforementioned four issues should be given more weight in future teaching to intensify students' learning.

## Limitations and future research

Although the results of this study suggest potential effectiveness of unfocused indirect WCF, a few limitations need to be highlighted. All the students did not write the essays on the same topics, because they were provided with a range of topics to select from. Put differently, some topics might be more demanding and complex than others, which might affect the number of errors. Moreover, the second essay was written only a couple of weeks after the first one. Therefore, if the second essay had been written several weeks after writing the first essay, the results might have been different. However, the length of the course was only seven weeks, which affected the study design. If the course had been longer, the delayed effect of unfocused indirect WCF on the first essay could quite possibly be divergent. It is also important to note that the long-term effect of unfocused indirect WCF on students' grammatical proficiency remains unknown.

There is insufficient research on unfocused indirect WCF to draw any firm conclusions on its impact on learning. However, on the basis of the evidence presented in this paper, it seems fair to suggest that unfocused indirect WCF can enhance language learning and particularly the learning of English articles. Subsequent studies need to examine these results more closely. For example, it would be of interest to survey how long the effect of unfocused indirect WCF lasts, particularly on the use of articles. Another essential question to consider is how unfocused indirect WCF can contribute to the learning of English prepositions. Lastly, given that teacher feedback lay at the heart of this study, more attention is required to establish how peer feedback enhances the learning of English grammar. Focusing on these salient questions will be of critical importance for many stakeholders, such as researchers, students, and English teachers.

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