

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL)**

Case study

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## **Abstract**

Based on the fact that the competence of written production is part of the communication of any language, it is necessary to develop and monitor it constantly. Therefore, this study has been conducted to analyse the types of error most frequently targeted by English language teachers through interviews with various English language teachers. Next, investigate the strategies used to respond to the students' written productions and verify which type of feedback is more encouraging and beneficial for the participating students in the 4th year of ESO at a secondary school in the region of Ripollès. The results show that learners prioritise one type of written corrective feedback, being direct, in contrast to teachers, who prefer a combination of the three types of corrective feedback (direct, indirect, and metalinguistic) depending on the level of the learners.

**Keywords:** Written CF, EFL, error correction, writing skills, strategies, direct, indirect, metalinguistic.

## **Resum**

Partint del fet que la competència de producció escrita forma part de la comunicació de qualsevol llengua, cal desenvolupar-la i fer-ne un seguiment constant. Aquest estudi s'ha realitzat amb l'objectiu d'analitzar el tipus d'error més focalitzat pel professorat de llengua anglesa a través d'entrevistes a diversos professors de llengua anglesa. Seguidament, investigar les estratègies emprades per donar resposta a les produccions escrites de l'alumnat i verificar quin tipus de feedback resulta més encoratjador i beneficiós per part dels estudiants participants de 4t d'ESO d'un institut de secundària de la comarca del Ripollès. Els resultats mostren que els estudiants prioritzen un tipus de feedback correctiu escrit, el directe, contràriament al professorat, que prefereix la combinació dels tres tipus d'estils correctius (directe, indirecte i metalingüístic) en funció del nivell dels estudiants.

**Paraules clau:** Feedback correctiu escrit, anglès com a llengua estrangera, correcció d'errors, habilitats d'escriptura, estratègies, directe, indirecte, metalingüístic.

## 1. Theoretical justification

After reading and researching written corrective feedback (CF), the need has arisen to study why written expression skills are so weak for secondary school students. According to some experts (Truscott, 1996; Truscott & Hsu, 2008), written assessment is a tool that still shows many shortcomings, and more research is needed in the field of education. According to their typology, whether our students receive adequate written feedback from teachers, how they perceive it, and how effective it is, has been raised.

This dissertation aims, from the perspectives of Didactics of language and literature, to respond to the dissatisfaction with the state of things (Bronckart & Schneuwly, 1996, p. 66) and to intervene in the process of learning and acquisition of the language by students (Milian & Camps, 1990).

Given that doing didactics means constructing knowledge about teaching and learning, even if the aim of this knowledge is the teaching practice itself (Camps & Ruiz Bikandi, 2011, pp. 11-12). It is considered opportune to propose the following study and identify the impact of the different methods of written corrective feedback on students and the improvement of their writing skills through the written CF provided by EFL teachers.

The main objectives of this research are the following three:

- ❖ Analyse the type of errors that teachers focus on more.
- ❖ Investigate the different kinds of written feedback for error correction, how teachers put them into practice and why?
- ❖ Verify what type of written CF (direct, indirect, or metalinguistic) is the most effective and encouraging for the students in the secondary school?

The following lines present EFL learners' written production in English in order to understand what kind of feedback is most useful to them and why.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 EFL students' writing skills**

Writing is commonly known as one of the most challenging skills to acquire in a second language learning process. Hyland (2003) states that each learner has a different background experience in terms of aptitude, motivation, metacognitive knowledge, and personal features such as age or sex, which potentially influence the acquisition of the L2 writing skills. These factors must be considered when EFL teachers provide learning strategies. The author mentioned above also points out that non-native English speakers have difficulty writing in the second language while still learning it. The linguistic base is not solid, and consequently, some studies indicate that texts produced by L2 writers tend to be less coherent, shorter, less fluent, and comprise more errors (e.g., Purves, 1988). This evinces a clear vision of the EFL students' frustration at being hindered from expressing their ideas accurately and making good use of the English language.

EFL learners often state that writing is a challenging task. In order to achieve a high quality of syntactic and morphological written expression, a wide range of vocabulary and grammar is required, and good proficiency in the use of established forms and the means of signalling the connection of the texts (Cumming, 2001, p. 3). Budianto et al. (2020) point out that it is essential to consider that the central goal of corrective feedback is to improve EFL learners' writing proficiency. Therefore, by implementing the written CF, the long-term transformations are better valued in learning experience and enjoyment (Wu et al., 2011). Budianto et al. (2020) state that every learning process requires effort, and to improve students' accuracy in L2 writing, the teacher has an important role. Therefore, corrective feedback becomes a helpful alternative since it improves the results of EFL learners' writing. The authors keep emphasising that corrective feedback aims to improve the quality of writing in L2 because corrective feedback shows learners' errors and expects learners to apply the proper language characteristics.



It is necessary to understand teachers' practices in EFL writing classes and whether they are applying innovative approaches or self-identifying as facilitators of change (Carless, 2011).

Darwish (2016) indicates four main challenges affecting teaching EFL writing: (1) teachers' attitudes, (2) teachers' professional development, (3) backwash<sup>1</sup> of the examination system, and (4) teaching large classes.

Referring to the first challenge, it is worth mentioning that teachers' attitudes play a fundamental role in teaching EFL writing since their strategies can affect the lessons. Bartscher et al. (2001) assert that we must take writing attitude into account for achieving effective writing performance. Masgoret and Gardner (2003) state that the literature on foreign language learning supports the connection between attitudes and the language itself.

Concerning the second challenge, the importance of conscious teacher training through professional development programs should be emphasised. As Alexander (2008) claims, the "awareness" of one's teaching practice means a constant evolution in terms of teaching.

As for the third challenge, we can state that the backwash or washback effect is the cause of hindering the learning and teaching processes by emphasising tests and getting good grades over learning how to write appropriately (Ahmad, 2010 as cited in Darwish, 2016).

There are several reasons why teaching large classes is challenging. Some of them may be classroom management, student-teacher relationships, and the time that teachers have to dedicate to planning and assessment (Darwish, 2016).

### **2.1.1 Analysis of errors**

According to Corder (1967), the errors EFL students make are significant because "they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language"

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<sup>1</sup> The effect of a test on teaching and learning the language (Saif, 2006; Saville, 2009; Takagi, 2010; Tsagari, 2012)

(p.167). He also states that teachers should differentiate between *errors* and *mistakes*. An error occurs when there is a lack of knowledge; hence, they are systematic. Conversely, mistakes are non-systematic because they occur when learners fail to perform proficiently. Besides differentiating between errors and mistakes, Yoshida (2008) identifies four different categories of error types: (1) morphosyntactic, (2) phonological, (3) lexical, (4) semantic and pragmatic. Morphosyntactic errors involve the improper use of word order, verb tense, use of articles, and prepositions. Phonological errors show the incorrect pronunciation of words. Lexical errors indicate misuse of vocabulary or code-switching to the target language caused by a shortage of lexical knowledge. Finally, semantic and pragmatic errors occur when there is linguistic interference in the meaning and use of language.

Blurt (as cited in Tesnim, 2019) proposes differentiating between global and local errors. The former is understood as those that affect the total comprehension of the text. At the same time, the latter does not interfere with communication since common errors are single elements (e.g., morphology errors).

Another distinction suggested by Ferris (as cited in Bitchener et al., 2005) is differentiating between treatable and non-treatable errors. The main difference between the two types is that treatable errors are lawful; non-treatable errors are "idiosyncratic features" such as word choice and non-idiomatic sentence structure. Essentially, the debate between two opposing views of "to correct or not to correct" should focus on ideas about "what needs to be corrected and how to correct it" (Guénette, 2007) for two reasons. First, errors must be corrected. Second, such errors must be addressed appropriately. Teachers or experts with excellent knowledge of the grammatical system can identify errors in the language (Phuket, 2015). The author also points out that "an error is perceived as the evidence resulting from the language learning process in which the learners use various strategies in learning a new language." He also mentions that multiple studies conducted to investigate errors made by students of different nationalities found that the primary source of writing errors was the students' native language.

Phuket (2015) also states that errors can emerge from two sources: interlinguistic and intralinguistic errors. The former comes from the interference of the target language in various linguistic areas such as grammar, morphology, phonology, syntax, lexis, and

semantics (Ellis, 2008, p. 350). In contrast, intralinguistic errors usually occur when there is insufficient language knowledge in the linguistic process (Kaweera, 2013, p. 13).

There are still many difficulties in teaching English writing to EFL learners, and, therefore, continuous error analysis is required to cope with this challenge.

## **2.2 The role of Written Corrective Feedback (CF)**

Bitchener and Ferris (2011), who study the impact of error correction or written CF in writing skills on second language acquisition, state that most studies about written CF about article errors or their functionality evince a clear improvement in general writing, more precisely, on accurate grammar. However, there is a lack of well-designed research, and it is suggested that teachers take all the components into account in the use of written CF. Truscott (1996) proposed that error correction should be abandoned in the article *Language Learning* and he continues to maintain his position based on theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical arguments (see Truscott, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2009) notwithstanding the empirical evidence and counter-arguments supported by the research of other theorists. Ferris (1999) responded to Truscott's arguments by claiming that the presented results were untimely and that more research was needed before deciding whether they were adequate.

Bitchener and Ferris (2012) suggest that written CF is produced in response to linguistic errors made in students' writing. Petchprasert (2012) states that feedback is an essential element of language education and learning that affects student learning and performance. Moreover, feedback helps learners and teachers find objective and valuable tools in the teaching and learning process.

Guénette (2007) reports that in providing corrective feedback, the key goals are twofold: (1) gaining accuracy in language and (2) gaining fluency in the language. Accuracy refers to local aspects of writing, while fluency deals with global ones. To seize fluency in writing, teachers' corrective feedback can be conceded in individualised statements for learners, as indicated by Ene and Kosobucki (2016).

## 2.3 Strategies for providing written CF

Ellis (2008) suggests a precise classification of types of corrective feedback for teachers to use when correcting linguistic errors, as well as when it is the best time to provide it, immediately or delayed, and whether there is a visible motivation to continue enhancing the SLA according to the type of feedback. These strategies comprise: direct CF, indirect CF, metalinguistic CF, unfocused CF, focused, electronic feedback, and reformulations.

### 2.3.1 Direct written CF

Direct CF consists of pointing out the error and providing the correction instantaneously, according to Van Beuningen (2010). Different ways of indicating mistakes can be by writing the proper form above the linguistic error or close to it, inserting missing words, or crossing out unnecessary words. The following example from Ellis (2008, p. 99) shows this method (Table I):

a	a	the				
A dog stole	<del>bone</del>	from	<del>butcher</del> .	He escaped with having	<del>bone</del> .	When the dog was
over	a	a	saw a			
going	<del>through</del>	bridge over	<del>the</del>	river he	<del>found</del>	dog in the river.

**Table I.** Example of Direct CF. Teacher provides the learner with the correct forms by crossing out unnecessary words, morphemes or phrases; inserting missing words or morphemes; and writing the correct form above or near the error.

The main advantage of using this strategy is explicitly providing the error corrections. Therefore, Ferris and Roberts (as cited in Farjadnasab & Khodashenas, 2017) point out that this strategy is more efficient than indirect feedback in low-level learners of writing proficiency. On the contrary, according to Ellis (2008), direct CF does not contribute to long-term learning, considering that it implies minimal learner effort.

### 2.3.2 Indirect written CF

Another correction strategy, according to Ferris, as cited in Bitchener Knoch, 2009, is indirect written CF. It is considered as the one in which the teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correct form. It can be done by underlining or using indicators to show the omissions in the students' texts. Indirectly, this correction method emphasises the students' role, making them reflect on their mistakes. Students are asked to study their errors and correct them (Ferris, 2002). Ellis (2008, p. 100) demonstrates this technique with the following example (Table II) and comments that indirect feedback would be more effective than direct feedback since students would be more immersed in the learning process.

A dog stole X bone from X butcher. He escaped with XhavingX X bone. When the dog was going XthroughX X bridge over XtheX river he found X dog in the river. X = missing word X __X = wrong word
---

**Table II.** Example of Indirect CF. Teacher gives indications that an error exists without providing corrections.

### 2.3.3 Metalinguistic written CF

Ellis (2008) explains that metalinguistic CF can be provided in two forms. The first and most commonly used is the error code. It consists of writing abbreviations in the margin of the text to give information about the type of error committed. For instance, art = article, prep. = preposition, ww = wrong word. The second, less common, requires the teacher to have a good metalinguistic background to provide precise grammatical descriptions of the errors written at the end of the text (Ellis, 2008). The following examples from Ellis (2008, pp. 101-102) illustrate the two forms (Tables III and IV):

Art. x 3; WW	A dog stole bone from butcher. He escaped with having bone.
Prep.; art.	When the dog was going through bridge over the river he
Art.	found dog in the river.

**Table III.** Example of Metalinguistic CF (Error Code). Teacher writes codes for different kinds of errors in the margin.

(1)	(2)	(3)
A dog stole bone from butcher. He escaped with having bone. When the dog was		
(4)	(5)	(6)
going through bridge over the river he found dog in the river.		
<i>(1), (2), (5), and (6)—you need 'a' before the noun when a person or thing is mentioned for the first time.</i>		
<i>(3)—you need 'the' before the noun when the person or thing has been mentioned previously.</i>		
<i>(4)—you need 'over' when you go across the surface of something; you use 'through' when you go inside something (e.g. 'go through the forest').</i>		

**Table IV.** Example of Metalinguistic CF (Provision of grammatical descriptions). Teacher provides students with metalinguistic explanations of the errors by numbering the errors in the text.

### 2.3.4 Focused vs. Unfocused CF

Written corrective feedback can be focused or unfocused. Although perceived differently, the two focuses can be applied to all corrective feedback strategies.

When focusing on specific types of errors, the feedback is focused (Ellis, 2008). It allows learners to examine different options of correction for the same error, enabling them to understand the source of the error and acquire the proper form. The author also presupposes that "the more intensive the attention is, the more likely the correction leads to learning" (p. 102).

When the teacher corrects all errors, the feedback is unfocused (Ellis, 2008). Based on Ellis et al. (2008), since unfocused feedback deals with multiple errors, it is considered to be extensive. Consequently, acquiring error correction will be slower and more complicated since it is not conducive to reflection (Moyano, 2019).

### 2.3.5 Electronic feedback

According to Ellis (as cited in Budianto et al., 2020), electronic feedback is provided by the teacher, who shows an error and creates a hyperlink to a file containing examples of correct usage. According to Ellis (2008), this strategy enhances students' independence in locating the most appropriate corrections for their texts. At the same time, the necessity for teachers to decide on what a correct form would constitute diminishes.

### **2.3.6 Reformulation**

“This consists of a native speaker’s reworking of the students’ entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact” (Ellis, 2008, p. 98). He continues by explaining that using this technique of reconstructing the original version but keeping the meaning by the teacher to make it sound more natural enables the students to decide whether or not to accept this reconstruction.

## **2.4 Written corrective feedback preferences**

Compared to oral corrective feedback, not much research has been conducted on students' and teachers' perceptions of written corrective feedback.

### **2.4.1 Teachers’ preferences**

Lubis et al. (2017) analysed the perceptions and attitudes of nineteen Indonesian university teachers about written CF. That study showed the instructors’ preference for direct CF and indirect CF. In addition, two professors opted for focused CF with verbal input, and one favoured indirect CF with verbal feedback as well. Another recent study developed by Black and Nanni (2016) showed that the preferable strategies to use for various native English teachers were the following in order of preference: (1) indirect CF with metalinguistic comments, (2) indirect CF, (3) direct CF with metalinguistic comments, (4) direct CF. Thus, as Moyano (2019) cited, teachers prefer direct and indirect feedback, although a bias for indirect CF with metalinguistic explanations is discernible.

#### **2.4.2 Students' preferences**

Zhang, 2018; Saeli & Cheng, 2019 (as cited in Zhang et al., 2021) state that the misalignment of written CF perceptions between learners and teachers will likely impede learners' capacity to use written CF effectively. Therefore, these studies reveal that it is crucial to consider students' considerations and preferences when offering written CF.

Only a few studies have investigated students' preferences about WCF types. However, Adriah et al. (2017) carried out a study with 54 EFL students at a university in Indonesia in which the results showed a clear preference for direct feedback over indirect feedback. This would reveal that students prefer teachers to correct all errors using direct CF rather than reflecting on them (Moyano, 2019). Hence, there is no alignment between teachers' and students' preferences since teachers favour indirect feedback, whereas students choose direct feedback. So it is worth noting that teachers should be aware of what their students prefer prior to selecting the type of written CF (Moyano, 2019).

#### **2.5 New written correction model suggestion**

Al-Jarrah (2016) suggests a new model of corrective feedback underlining three premises; a combination of error correction with error feedback, a focus on one linguistic structure simultaneously, and giving error correction to the aimed structure with all its practical uses. Rather than focusing on the grammatical aspects, Al-Jarrah (2016) goes one step further, proposing a global approach to written correction, such as considering the organisation, the content, and the meaning. Limited studies have been conducted on how the different types of error feedback are interrelated. The proposed analysis suggests providing content and form comments simultaneously as each draft revision. More technically, comments on errors are expected to drive global changes that affect meaning and organisation. Error corrections are intended to target minor corrections so that the final draft is error-free. Bitchener et al. (2005) made a noticeable finding. Those who received direct error correction and oral metalinguistic explanation performed better than those who did not. Their explanation was that past



tense and definite article structures are rule-based, whereas prepositional forms are rather peculiar and singular. Therefore, correcting prepositional forms instantly and without providing feedback may not help learners improve in successive revisions.

There is much work to be done to elicit the feasibility of this model. Al-Jarrah (2016) is performing another study on the proposed model usage in the EFL framework.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 The study**

Regarding the lines of research in language and literature teaching, the focus of the work is centred on process-focused research (Mendoza & Cantero, 2003). It is opportune to carry out educational research using qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative findings in the observation of students' written productions would allow for a better understanding of the quantitative data from the questionnaires (Creswell, 2014).

The methodology considered appropriate for the dissertation is mainly qualitative. However, some data collected from the questionnaires may be quantitative. Therefore, it can be perceived that the study has adopted a mixed position, as the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data can provide a more generic approach to the research topic. Blaxter et al. (2008) state that the qualitative paradigm focuses on understanding the actor's frame of reference behaviour. In contrast, the quantitative paradigm looks for aspects of social phenomena and tends to control variables (p.79). Thus, the research has been focused on carrying out a case study of two courses in the 4th year of ESO at a secondary school in the region of Ripollès.

The research intends to provide students with a writing task for which their English teacher would provide them with the corresponding feedback. After that, a questionnaire would be provided to the students to make them reflect on their EFL teacher's written CF in the English writing assignment. Then, some Secondary English teachers will respond to an interview focused on the use of their written CF, the most significant types of errors, the use of different strategies, and, finally, their

considerations about the effectiveness of improving on writing skills through their written CF.

Thus, the following research questions have emerged for this study:

- ❖ RQ1: *What type of written CF (direct, indirect, metalinguistic) do EFL teachers provide to correct errors?*
- ❖ RQ2: *What is essential to consider by following written CF strategies?*
- ❖ RQ3: *What type of written CF do students consider more beneficial to improve their writing skills?*

### **3.2 School context and participants**

In order to carry out this study, a large part of the data collection took place in a public Secondary school located in the region of Ripollès. A centre rooted in its people, innovative and forward-looking.

The school is currently attended by 127 students between the ages of 12 and 17, and the number of students per class ranges from 15 to 28 students, predominantly of Catalan origin. Moreover, it strives to guarantee equal opportunities for all students based on equity and inclusion. The main objective of this centre is to help learners develop themselves as autonomous, responsible, and tolerant. Furthermore, the Language Department of the participating secondary school aims to ensure that foreign languages (English in this case) are treated as a second language and are the subject of learning as a source of information and a vehicle for expression in the foreign language subject. It is also intended to be promoted in non-curricular areas. Therefore, English is introduced as a first foreign language and is taught for three hours a week in the fourth year of secondary school.

The chosen participants were the two courses in the fourth year of secondary school; both groups together comprised 26 students. The EFL teachers involved and interviewed in this study were five teachers from different public schools in the regions of Ripollès, Osona, and València. The EFL teacher of the participant courses has been an English teacher for most of her life. She is Catalan, although she has lived and

worked for many years in the USA and, therefore, her knowledge of the language is excellent. She was selected to proofread a writing exercise that was part of a second-term exam. It consisted of writing a post of between 80 and 90 words about their own family or an imaginary one for a teen magazine. The post had to include a topic on which they disagreed with the parents, parents' opinions and actions, and their feelings and opinions. In addition, following the instructions, the teacher provided helpful language to use in the task. Finally, the students could look at a checklist with items that the teacher would evaluate at the end of the exercise.

### **3.3 Data collection instruments and procedure**

Three instruments were used to collect data: 15 writing compositions from a group of fourth of secondary and corrected by their English teacher, a questionnaire, and an interview.

The first research technique was an interview aimed at English teachers to find out what type of written corrective feedback they use more frequently and why they think their feedback is appropriate to motivate and encourage EFL students to improve their writing skills. Eleven questions were prepared in advance and designed to obtain qualitative data. The whole interview was created not to ask tendentiously or induce an answer and inform the interviewee about the purpose of the interview and its use. The semi-structured interview was administered online to the participating EFL teachers so that they could read it carefully and have enough time to reflect on their responses.

Another technique has been the use of a questionnaire to collect students' perceptions and opinions when receiving different types of feedback to improve EFL students' performance in writing. The aim of the questionnaire is for students to answer various types of questions by rating specific items using Likert scales and an open-answer to collect data from 26 students for written corrective feedback. These open-ended questions are crucial to obtaining qualitative data from the 26 learners participants in the study.

The questionnaire has been designed to simplify the analysis of the data collected. Several steps have been followed to construct it. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) assert

that an attractive questionnaire design helps obtain more reliable and valid data. Thus, the questionnaire has been divided into three blocks so that students feel clarity when responding.

The main components of the questionnaire involved the title, followed by the date and the institution where this study was carried out, the general instructions structured by bullet points, and a reminder of no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire items, which are mainly thought to answer the study's research questions, have been created using standard descriptive terms (i.e., strongly agree- strongly disagree) to see the level of agreement. Also, a numerical rating scale has been applied in the second block, specifying what each category stands for. Finally, an open-ended question is placed in the third block at the end of the questionnaire. However, questionnaires are not suited for a qualitative investigation; just one question with a guided and organised answer was considered. Fowler (2002) states that if students have to answer closed questions, they could feel limited and frustrated because they are not allowed to make their suggestions.

The items were written simply, avoiding ambiguity and negative constructions and using natural language. In addition to that, the items were translated to avoid losing data compilation information, and respondents did not answer a question because they did not understand its meaning correctly.

The last instrument was the analysis of fifteen writings. Although there were 26 students, the teacher provided only a few samples. The aim was to collect data on the students' most frequent errors and see how their EFL teacher corrects them and what type of written CF is most frequently used.

The writing task was designed to be done in an English test from the second term. It aimed to write a post about the learner's own family or an imaginary one to a teen magazine. They were supposed to write between 80 and 90 words. Some functional language was provided so that they could use the expressions. Some examples were: "First, ... / Next, ... / During the... I was... / In my opinion". At the end of the writing exercise, the English teacher presented a checklist for the students to consider which items would be assessed in the final evaluation of the text. The items were the following: grammar, text organisation, capitalization, punctuation, word order, connectors, and expressions of opinion.

## **4. Data analysis and Results**

The software used to analyse the quantitative data from the questionnaire were Google Forms and Excel, which made it possible to create graphs or tables for the numerical items. For the errors analysed in the written compositions, the responses collected were classified into the 11 types of errors observed (grammar, prepositions, spelling, vocabulary, capitalisation, translation, SVO, register, punctuation, word order, and organisation). The most frequent and repetitive responses were then selected to associate a percentage to each pattern.

The results of this study are divided into three sections according to the data collection instruments used. (1) the most common errors outlined by an EFL teacher from the writing compositions and the type of written CF employed, (2) all the information compiled by the learners through the questionnaires, and (3) the results obtained from the EFL teachers' interview responses.

### **4.1 Analysis of learner's errors and teacher's corrections**

To collect data on the most frequent types of errors corrected by an English language secondary school teacher, 15 writing compositions were analysed into two main categories: (1) which errors are most frequently made by learners, (2) what type of written CF (direct, indirect or metalinguistic) the teacher uses to correct them. The categories were analysed in percentage terms. After the analysis and revision of the 15 texts, the students' most frequent errors are as follows: Grammar, Prepositions, Spelling, Vocabulary, Capitalisation, Translation, Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), Register, Punctuation, Word Order, and Organisation. Among these, the most notable error among all the texts, with a percentage of 36%, was grammar, followed by 17% of spelling, 9% of SVO errors, and punctuation and vocabulary both with 8% (See Figure 1 in Appendix 8.1).

Regarding the type of corrective feedback that predominates in the corrections of the texts, in general terms, a combination of direct and indirect forms can be observed. However, 80% of corrections are made using indirect feedback. The teacher, in most cases, underlines or indicates that there is an error without giving the correct form and

encourages the student to reflect on his/her errors. However, when she provides direct feedback, i.e., the correct form, it is usually on four types of errors; (1) infinitive and gerund forms, (2) prepositions, (3) literal translations from the mother tongue (calque), (4) punctuation.

On rare occasions, there is a metalinguistic feedback. For example, when a learner repeats a word frequently, the teacher marks with an 'R' throughout the text, or provides some comments at the end of the exercise such as: "Rephrase, check your pronouns, your two main areas of improvement should be..., please improve your handwriting". Also, she makes use of positive stamps, never negative. The messages of these stamps are as follows: "Great effort, good thinking, keep trying, needs improvement, excellent work".

#### **4.2 Learner's questionnaire about written CF**

Graphs and percentages were developed from the data analysed from the questionnaires to determine the reactions of secondary school students towards the importance of written corrective feedback. The quantitative data were supplemented with summarised information from the qualitative data.

The approach of the questionnaire was to obtain data about the importance of written CF to improve students' writing skills in English as a Foreign Language. The questionnaire was posed with 14 questions. These questions aimed to obtain information about students' reactions toward written CF. In order to obtain this information, data collection was carried out as follows:

For the first part of the questionnaire, in which the participants had to punctuate with an "X" (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) the opinion they had about seven statements, the results showed the following: an 84% of students strongly agree with the fact that they like to write without errors, a 57% strongly agree with the fact that they like that the teacher corrects all the errors in English writing tasks, a 42% agree with the fact that the teacher corrects the most relevant errors in the English writing texts, a 50% agree with the fact that they understand the teacher's explanations of written feedback of their errors, a 46% agree that check all the errors that teachers correct of their written English tasks, a 92% strongly agree or agree with

the fact that it is bothering to repeat the same errors every time they write, and a 46% strongly agree with the fact that written corrective feedback helps to improve their English writing skill compared to a 38% who agree and 11% that disagree (See Figure 2 in Appendix 8.1).

The following six questions were dedicated to assessing statements according to scales of 1 to 4 (being one totally agree and four totally disagree). The results showed that 96% of the students found it helpful when the English teacher provided them with the correct form of errors (Direct feedback). Furthermore, 32% of students agree on the usefulness of indicating that an error exists by underlining or circling the mistake without correcting it (Indirect feedback). An average of 48% of students find it helpful when the English teacher writes codes in the margin (e.g., ww = wrong word; art = article) and lets them correct by themselves (Metalinguistic feedback). In addition, 92% totally agree that their overall writing improves when receiving written direct feedback, unlike 52% who say that their overall writing improves when receiving written indirect feedback.

Less than the average (36%) determine that the overall writing does not improve when receiving written metalinguistic feedback. (See Figure 3 in Appendix 8.1). So, there is clear evidence and preference for Direct Feedback regarding preferences and improvement of the EFL writing skills amongst Secondary education learners.

Concerning the latter part of the questionnaire, an open-ended question was asked "Of the last three types of written corrective feedback described (direct, indirect, or metalinguistic), which one do you think is the most useful for you as a secondary school student? Why?", and the results have shown that a significant majority of learners, representing more than half (23 out of 25), favour direct corrective feedback (See Figure 4). Below are some of the answers to the reasons they gave:

"Directe, perquè el millor és que quan facis un error el professor et digui que has fallat perquè si no em puc tornar a equivocar, ja que no sé quin és l'error."

"Directe, perquè si em marquen la cosa que està malament depèn de quina paraula no sabre la que és correcte, en canvi, si em diuen la que tinc malament i em diuen com ha de ser sabre la que és i miraré que a la següent redacció no em torni a passar."

"L'estil directe perquè si t'ho corregeixen tot saps segur que el que t'hi han corregit està bé i per al pròxim examen ja no faràs aquest error."

"El directe, perquè és més fàcil de veure i ja saps com s'escriu bé la paraula. Si no t'indica com s'escriu correctament pot ser que el pròxim cop facis el mateix error."

### **4.3 Teacher's interview about written CF**

The interviews aimed at the English teachers were analysed by reading them several times to find recurrent responses and differences in terms of written CF. Eleven questions were examined, but the most prominent ones were assessed and summarised.

Concerning the importance of giving corrective feedback to students, the five EFL teachers firmly agree that it is essential to give written corrective feedback to students. Some of their answers were the following:

" It enables students to improve texts by revising their writing pieces and giving them another opportunity to rewrite their productions."

" It is important to learn from their errors, but not all the students revise their writings."

" It is important because students learn by paying attention to their own mistakes."

" Yes, because they can see where they made mistakes and reflect on their production. "

" Yes, because they should be aware of how they performed their productions."

As for the most significant errors to be corrected when giving written corrective feedback to students, there are various responses from the five teachers interviewed. Two of them affirm that all errors are equally important. However, one of the teachers' preferences is text organisation with supporting paragraphs that flow. The other claims that all errors that may lead to the misunderstanding of the text must be corrected. Two other teachers agree on correcting grammar, vocabulary, lack of pauses or too long sentences, capitalization, spelling, and the use of articles because, generally, the production level is not too high at the secondary level. Moreover, one of the teachers states that apart from these errors, the most important thing is to make students aware of the importance of writing to learn the structure of English that does not exist



in their native language. Finally, another teacher differentiates oral production from written production and claims that the latter allows proofreading contrary to oral production, so it is more important what they have worked on in the class apart from setting the priorities clear in the instructions.

Referring to the strategies followed when correcting students' writings, all the teachers strongly agree that it depends on the level of secondary studies they are teaching. 4 out of 5 use the strategy of highlighting and underlining serious errors, e.g., confusing the verb with the noun (*my sister is life*) or subject-verb agreement (*my parents doesn't like*). Hence, they use indirect feedback and sometimes give clues such as SVO (meaning they skipped the subject). Nevertheless, there is a teacher who would adapt the corrections depending on the kind of written production. She explains that in certain types of texts, such as essays, that demand a more complex organisation, correction should pay special attention to the production's structure, cohesion, and coherence. In addition, she is against metalinguistic feedback in lower-level students since they are usually not familiar with language reflections.

All the EFL teachers agree that the most challenging aspect of correcting students' writings is the literal translation from the mother tongue. Therefore, the original text should be respected as much as possible as long as it is correct. Furthermore, one out of five states that correcting is time-consuming, and there is a feeling that sometimes teachers spend more time correcting than students writing. She asks them to do brainstorming, first draft, and final draft.

A significant point to highlight is that all the participant teachers perceive their provision of feedback as unmeaningful. They agree that most students do not pay much attention to their corrections and only tend to look at them to see if they have passed or not. However, one teacher also indicates that students tend to be more attentive if an activity is done immediately after the feedback.

To the question about what they thought excellent corrective feedback should include, most of them answered that it would be interesting to include suggestions, comments, and advice. i.e., a combination of positive aspects encourages them to improve and learn from their mistakes. Also, two teachers commented on the importance of giving this feedback immediately after submitting their papers.

Three EFL teachers commented that they have never used or do not have an Error Code. One of the main reasons is that both students and some teachers found it too complicated to follow, and since it was only used for English, it did not serve its initial purpose. Therefore, two of them use an Error code instead, and they provide it to students at the beginning of the school year.

There is a tendency among teachers to give feedback using the three types of feedback (direct, indirect, and metalinguistic). However, two of them report that they use direct feedback for lower levels and indirect or metalinguistic feedback for higher levels. Moreover, talking about the adaptability of feedback to each student, the EFL teachers consider that, in some way, they have already adapted feedback to their needs because every student has his/her correction. "Providing strategies such as collaborative writing, pre-teach vocabulary, and having a model writing ready for students with learning difficulties before the writing process begins helps students lower anxiety of coming up with some sort of writing piece," one of the teachers states.

One of the most relevant questions was whether teachers believe that corrective feedback effectively improves their students' writing skills. In this part of the interview, there were different opinions. However, some similarities were that students do not pay much attention to feedback. The best way to improve is by practising and practising; students should learn how to use feedback correctly at the beginning of the secondary school stage if there is the same method for all teachers. Furthermore, they suggest that giving feedback full of corrections can be counterproductive and discouraging for students.

Four out of five teachers agree that giving a second chance to rewrite the text is good, even if there is not enough time. They tend to write down the most frequent mistakes on the board, discuss them, revise the errors in pairs, swap writings, and do a checklist of what their partner should include in his/her writing. However, the remaining teacher disagrees with the fact that rewriting is helpful to learn from mistakes, but writing a new text based on a topic of their choice, even though having to respect the features of the kind of text involved, could be more engaging for learners.

Being a case study, it is impossible to generalise the results. Therefore, the description of what is seen in this context is what it has been possible to analyse in a secondary

school in the region of Ripollès in a setting of 26 students in the 4th year of ESO, their EFL teacher, and the participant EFL teachers from other regions and centres.

(See the appendices, where all the figures about the results of the most frequent types of errors marked by the EFL teacher and the questionnaires are available).

## **5. Discussion**

The main purpose of this study was to answer three research questions. Twenty-six written productions were analysed, twenty-six questionnaires were revised, and five interviews were conducted to address the initial questions. The results are discussed below with the theoretical framework of this study. The discussion is structured according to the order of the research questions mentioned in the study.

Regarding the RQ1, "What type of written CF (direct, indirect, or metalinguistic) do EFL teachers provide for correction of errors?" the present study shows that EFL teachers tend to correct written productions using the strategy of highlighting and underlining serious mistakes. According to Ferris, cited in Bitchener Knoch, 2009, this is an indirect written CF. It is one in which the teacher indicates that there is an error but does not provide the correct form. Furthermore, as Ferris (2002) points out, the indirect correction method emphasises the role of the learner, as it makes them study their mistakes, reflect on and correct them.

EFL teachers consider it essential to give written corrective feedback to learners in order for them to learn and reflect on their mistakes as Petchprasert (2012) states, that feedback is an essential element of language education and learning that affects students' learning and performance.

In locating the types of errors in the written productions analysed, a precise frequency of corrections with indirect and non-focused feedback styles was observed. As Ellis et al. (2008) comment, this type of non-focused feedback tries to correct multiple errors and does not examine the option of correcting specific errors.

With respect to RQ2, "What is essential to consider by following written CF strategies?" in deciding which type of strategy is most appropriate for providing one type of feedback or another, it is vital to understand the perceptions and preferences

of both teachers and students. Zhang, 2018; Saeli & Cheng, 2019 (as cited in Zhang et al., 2021) said that the impediment to using written CF is the lack of alignment between students and teachers. Although there is a tendency among EFL teachers to correct using all three forms of written corrective feedback, two of them indicate that they use direct feedback with lower-level learners and indirect and metalinguistic feedback with higher-level learners. This statement confirms Ferris and Roberts' (cited in Farjadnasab & Khodashenas, 2017) finding that direct feedback is more efficient than indirect feedback with low-level learners of writing proficiency.

Considering teachers' preferences, the results of this study showed an apparent selection for a combination of the three types of feedback (direct, indirect, and metalinguistic) depending on the level of the learner. However, in the study carried out by Black and Nanni (2016), teachers did not opt much for direct feedback but favoured indirect feedback with metalinguistic comments. Writing in English is a challenge, let alone teaching English to write. Phuket (2015) found that the learner's mother tongue was the primary source of writing errors. So do secondary school EFL teachers when they say that the biggest challenge in correcting written productions is the literal translation of the mother tongue.

In the results of the written productions analysed, the learners' most frequent types of errors were five main aspects: grammar, spelling, SVO, punctuation, and vocabulary. These errors can be identified within the four categories suggested by Yoshida (2008): morphosyntactic, phonological, lexical, semantic, and pragmatic. Thus, all components should be considered when using written CF (Bitchener & Ferris, 2011).

To answer the RQ3, "What type of written CF students consider more beneficial to improve their writing skills?", it was necessary to revise the results of the questionnaires in a general overview (See Appendix, Figure 3). The results of the students' preferences are for Direct CF in terms of improvement of the EFL writing skills and usefulness. The results showed that 96% of the students found it helpful when the English teacher provided them with the correct form of errors (Direct CF), and 92% agreed that their overall writing improves when receiving written direct feedback. Thus, the results have shown that most learners (23 out of 25) favour direct corrective feedback (See Appendix, Figure 4). This result would reveal what Moyano (2019) reiterated, that students prefer teachers to correct all errors rather than reflect

on them. The reasons given by learners favouring direct feedback counterpose to what Ellis (2008) considered, direct feedback does not contribute to long-term learning. It, therefore, involves minimal effort on the part of the learner, and providing indirect feedback contributes more to the immersion in the learning process. 46% of the learners agree on the importance of receiving written CF to improve their EFL writing skills. Hence this fact corroborates what many studies have found about the positive impact of written CF on second language acquisition and not abandoning it as proposed by Truscott (1996).

From this perspective, it is deduced that the students' ability to understand and reflect on their errors would be higher if the process of corrective feedback is not provided in an indirect or metalinguistic form.

## **6. Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to analyse the type of errors teachers focus on most, to investigate the different types of strategies of written CF, how teachers implement them and why, and to verify which type of written CF (direct, indirect, or metalinguistic) is the most effective and encouraging for secondary school learners.

From an educational perspective, the purpose of written corrective feedback is not explained effectively enough in the classroom. When it is presented as a learning tool, there is also feedforward, i.e., there is a future impact that helps to detect errors and to correct them as well as formative assessment, which is an assessment based on learning and not only on evaluating and scoring. This possibly is what is missing when it comes to writing activities in the classroom. Therefore, all the proposed writing exercises by EFL teachers should be complemented; otherwise, the student sees it as another task that stays in the classroom.

High cognitive impact exercises are needed to think, reflect, and deepen the error. Therefore, meaningful, reflection-inducing, and permanent learning takes place using indirect corrective feedback. In contrast, this deep reflection does not occur when direct feedback is used, and consequently, the learning is not meaningful. Furthermore, it does not contribute to assuming responsibility for one's learning process.

Regardless, the results presented should be seen under some constraints. The results obtained are closely related to a specific school context, which may not be generalised as the sample is delimited. Finally, as a suggestion for the future, based on what has been seen and analysed about written corrective feedback, an everyday basis should be established for foreign language teachers to impact learners positively. Thus, the learning process would be more meaningful and reflective.

One of the study's limitations was that only one teacher carried out the corrections of the written productions, and therefore only this specific case could be observed.

In addition, the time factor is another limitation, as a second level of analysis could have been carried out, considering a review of the written and corrected productions by grade range.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Figures

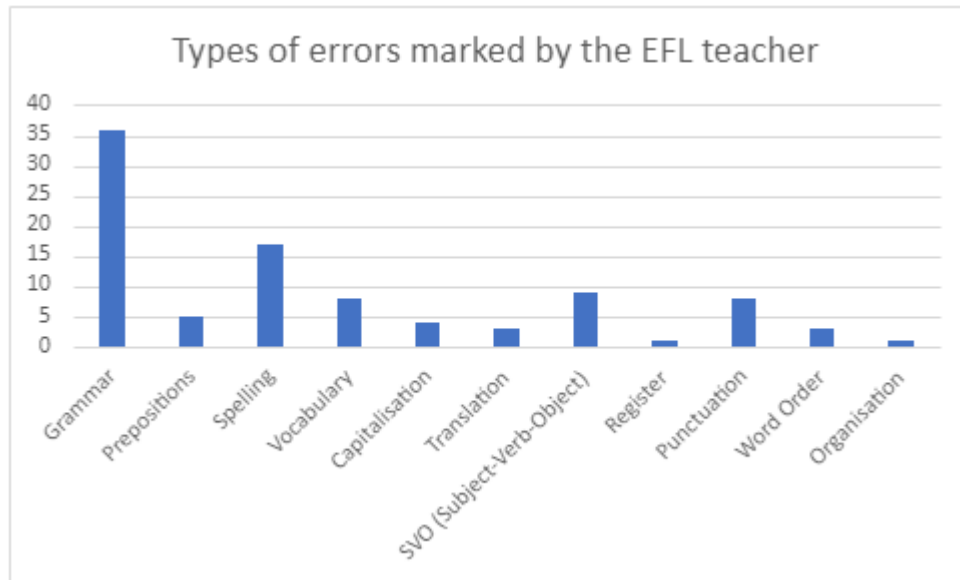


Figure 1. Students' frequent errors observed in the writing compositions.

PART I (Questions 1-7) Reactions of students towards written corrective feedback

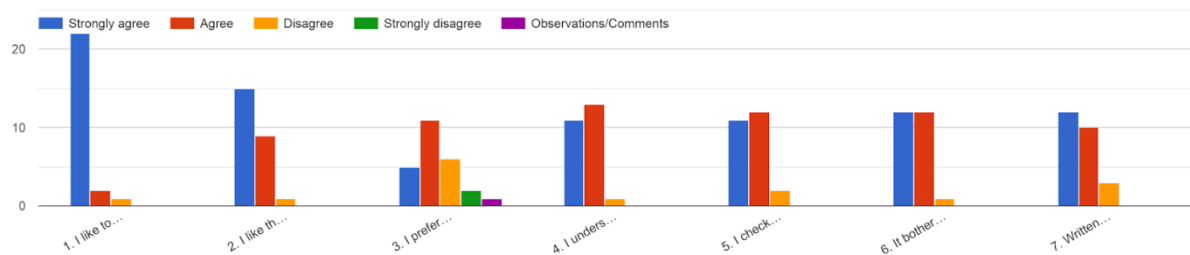


Figure 2. Reactions of students towards written CF.

### Results Questionnaire PART II

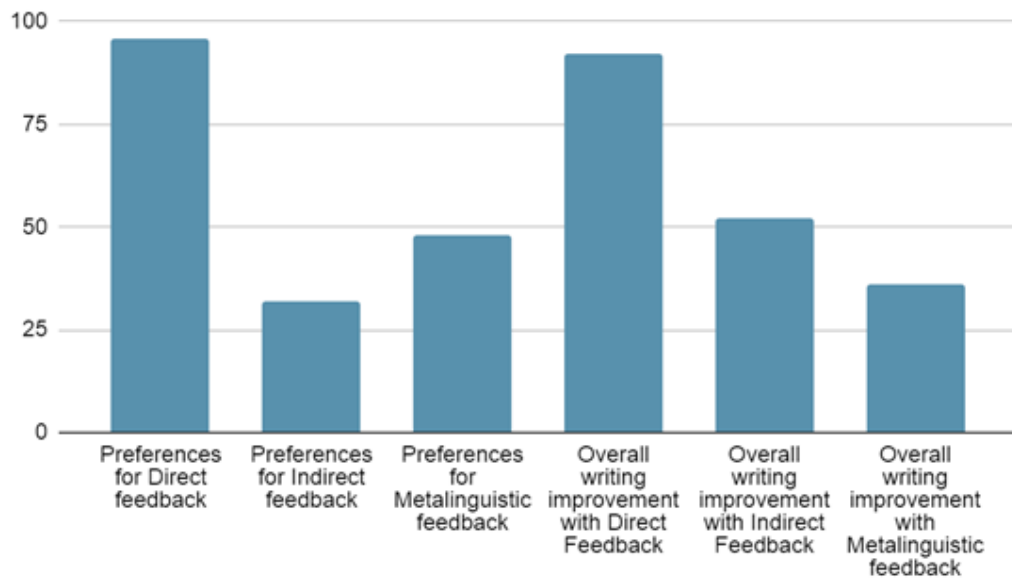


Figure 3. Students' perceptions taking into account the teacher's written CF used.

### Results Questionnaire Part III

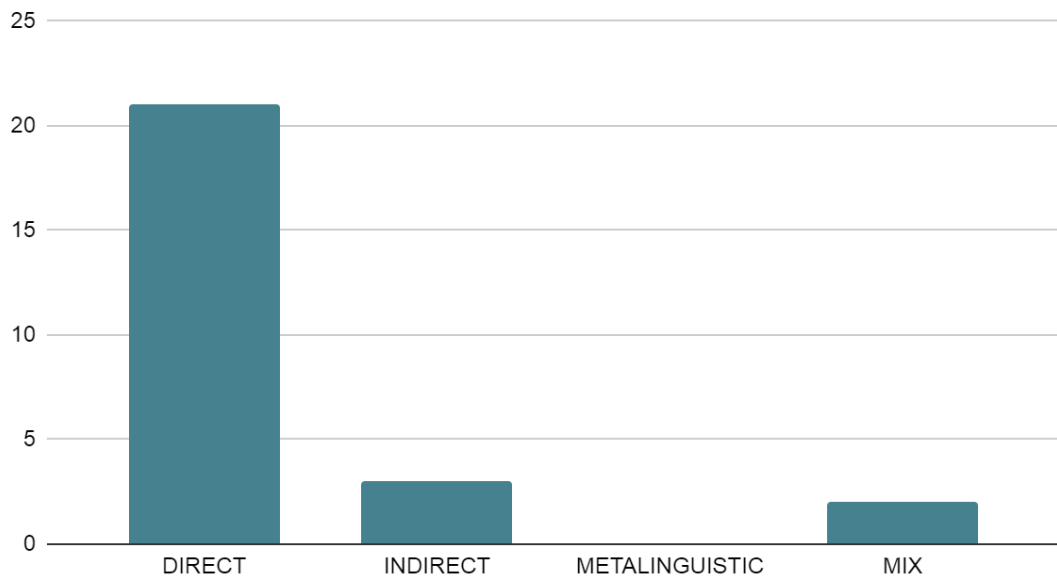


Figure 4. Students' preferences according to the type of written CF.

**8.2 Appendix I:** Questionnaire about the importance of Written Corrective Feedback (Written CF) to improve students' writing skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

**PART I (Questions 1-7) Reactions of students towards written corrective feedback**

**Strongly agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree**

1. I like to write without errors. / M'agrada escriure sense errors.
2. I like the teacher to correct ALL the errors in English writing tasks. / M'agrada que la professora em corregeixi TOTS els errors en les tasques d'expressió escrita de llengua anglesa.
3. I prefer the teacher to correct the most relevant errors in the English writing text. / Prefereixo que la professora corregeixi els errors més rellevants de les tasques d'expressió escrita en anglès.
4. I understand the teacher's explanations of written feedback of my mistakes. / Entenc les explicacions que la professora em dona sobre els meus errors.
5. I check all the errors that teachers correct of my written English tasks. / Reviso tots els errors que la professora d'anglès em corregeix en les tasques d'expressió escrita.
6. It bothers me to repeat the same mistakes every time I write. / Em molesta repetir els mateixos errors cada vegada que faig una tasca d'expressió escrita en anglès.
7. Written corrective feedback helps me to improve my English writing. / La correcció escrita ajuda a millorar la meva expressió escrita en anglès.

**PART II (Questions 8-13) Assess the following statements according to a scale of 1 to 4 below**

**1= Totally agree, 2= Agree, 3= Disagree, 4= Totally disagree**

8. I find it useful when the English teacher provides me with the correct form of errors (Direct feedback) / Crec que és útil quan el professorat em corregeix tots els errors.
9. I find it useful when the English teacher indicates that an error exists by underlining or circling the mistake but does not provide the correction (Indirect feedback) /

Prefereixo que el professorat m'indiqui que hi ha un error, subratllat o encerclat, però no me'n doni la correcció.

**10.** I find it useful when the English teacher writes codes in the margin (e.g., ww = wrong word; art = article) and lets me correct by myself. (Metalinguistic feedback) / Trobo útils els codis que els professors apunten als marges del text escrit (p.ex., ww=wrong word; art = article; gr = grammar) i em permet autocorregir-me els errors.

**11.** My overall writing improves when I receive written direct feedback (Teacher provides the correct forms). / La meva expressió escrita millora quan rebo feedback escrit directe (Quan el professorat em corregeix tots els errors). \*Mirar exemple a la graella de tipus de feedback correctiu.

**12.** My overall writing improves when I receive written indirect feedback (The teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction). / La meva expressió escrita millora quan rebo feedback escrit indirecte (El professorat indica que hi ha un error però no em corregeix). \*Mirar exemple a la graella de tipus de feedback correctiu.

**13.** My overall writing improves when I receive written metalinguistic feedback (Teacher writes codes in the margin (e.g., ww = wrong word; art = article; gr = grammar). / La meva expressió escrita millora quan rebo feedback escrit metalingüístic ( El professorat escriu codis d'error, per exemple: ww = paraula equivocada; art = article; gr = gramàtica). \*Mirar exemple a la graella de tipus de feedback correctiu.

**OPEN-ENDED QUESTION (Question 14):**

**14.** From the last three types of written corrective feedback described, which one do you think is the most useful for you as a Secondary school student? Why? / Dels tres tipus de feedback correctiu escrit descrits anteriorment (directe, indirecte i metalingüístic), quin creus que és el més útil per a tu com a estudiant de secundària? Per què?

**8.3 Appendix II:** Interview to Secondary English Language teachers about written CF.


1. Do you believe it is important to give students written corrective feedback of their written productions? Why?
2. Which type of errors do you think are more significant to correct when giving written corrective feedback to students? (Grammar, vocabulary, content, organisation...). Do all of them have the same importance to you?
3. What strategy do you follow when correcting students' writings? Do you adapt your feedback depending on the written production?
4. In your opinion, what is the most difficult aspect to correct in students' writings?
5. How do you perceive students' reactions of your written corrective feedback?
6. Ideally, what should good written corrective feedback include?
7. Have you got an Error Code? If so, do you often use it? Do you provide this code to your students?
8. From the Figure above, which type of written corrective feedback do you use? If any, do you think it is similar to one of them? Why?
9. Do you believe it should be necessary to provide adapted written corrective feedback to each student? At some point, have you ever had to do it?
10. Realistically, from your experience, how far do you think that written corrective feedback is effective to improve students' writing skills in English?
11. Do you think students would improve their written production by giving them a second chance to rewrite their written production? Have you ever tried doing collective feedback or feedforward?

**8.4 Appendix III:** Provisions of written CF by the EFL teacher participating in the study.

school is the most important thing at my age and I need to have excellent spelling grades. That's why I'm so annoyed, because I love playing basketball and I don't want to leave it.

However, I believe that now, my parents are more relaxed and I think that I can do both things at the same time.

9



<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHECKLIST I used... correctly.	
1	grammar
2	text organisation
2✓	capital letters, punctuation, word order
2✓	connectors
2✓	expressions of opinion



My dad forces Claudia to do ballet, but she ~~likes~~ <sup>(do)</sup> skateboarding.

And mum forces Natalia to ~~sing~~ <sup>sing</sup>, but she ~~likes~~ <sup>(do)</sup> karate, she

~~likes~~ <sup>it</sup> a lot. They shouldn't be the prototype of perfect daughters.

He and Natalia ~~think~~ <sup>think</sup> ~~that~~ <sup>Opinion</sup> people ~~will~~ <sup>grammar</sup> not be perfect, they could be ~~perfect~~ <sup>tenses</sup>.

~~do~~ everything ~~they~~ <sup>grammar</sup> want, ~~but~~ <sup>punctuation</sup> But anyway we ~~do~~ <sup>still</sup> love

our parents, and we are happy for the family.

Check Your Work 

5

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	CHECKLIST I used... correctly.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	grammar	0
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	text organisation	1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	capital letters, punctuation, word order	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	connectors ↓	1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	expressions of opinion	2

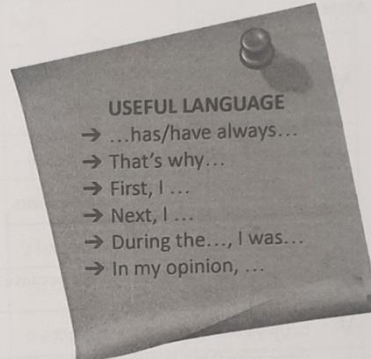
Your two main areas of improvement should be:

- 1) grammar
- 2) text organization

#### 4. Writing: A blog post (80-90 words)

Write a post to a teen magazine. Write about your own family or an imaginary one.  
You need to talk about the following:

- an issue that you and your parents disagree about
- your parents' actions / opinion
- your opinion and feelings



The school work is the first thing you have to do. For my parents

this it's certain that's why in their childhood they only do.

homework and never have run with their friends. First, I accept his

point of view and I respect. Next, I explain my opinion and

grammar  
PAST