



ISSN: 1500-0713

Article Title: The Effectiveness and Learners' Perception of Teacher Feedback on Japanese-as-a-Foreign Language Writing

Author(s): Nobuaki Takahashi

Source: *Japanese Studies Review*, Vol. XVII (2013), pp. 93 – 118

Stable URL: <https://asian.fiu.edu/projects-and-grants/japan-studies-review/journal-archive/volume-xvii-2013/takahashi-writing-feedback.pdf>

**THE EFFECTIVENESS AND LEARNERS'
PERCEPTION OF TEACHER FEEDBACK
ON JAPANESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING**

*Nobuaki Takahashi
Elizabethtown College*

Abstract

In the field of second language writing, much research has been implemented to examine the effect of corrective feedback. The results, however, are mixed and ambiguous. Although some scholars consider written corrective feedback unnecessary,¹ the role of corrective feedback has been supported by cognitive and psycholinguistic theories.² The essential question, then, is whether or not the written feedback contributes to the improvement of students' writing skills. Various types of written corrective feedback have been investigated in terms of its impact on learners' grammatical accuracy, fluency, and overall quality of their compositions. Although the written feedback has been investigated in second language learning settings (e.g., ESL in the U.S. or Japanese as a second language in Japan), it has not yet been fully examined in foreign language learning settings, especially on languages that are typologically different from English, such as Asian languages.

This study investigates the differential effects of corrective feedback on the Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) writing. Four intermediate-level students were asked to write a letter to a pen pal on a certain topic. Each learner underwent a different revision process: (a) "explicit correction" only, (b) "comment on content" only, (c) "grammar coding" only, and (d) combination of "grammar coding" and "comment on content." Upon receiving the written feedback, learners were asked to revise their letter within 48 hours, followed by interview session to elicit their perception of feedback, preference of "error correction," and revision

¹ John Truscott, "The Case for 'The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes:' A Response to Ferris," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8 (1999): 111–122.

² Younghee Sheen, "Introduction: The Role of Oral and Written Corrective Feedback in SLA," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 32 (2010): 169–179.

habits. Their revisions were assessed in terms of the fluency (number of T-units and characters) as well as the holistic improvement of the texts. The results show that the superior effect of the combination of “grammar coding” and “comment on content” over other types of feedback on the increase of the text length. For overall improvement, on the other hand, “comment on content” only impacted the most positively. Furthermore, the interview sessions revealed that learners generally perceived all the “error correction” as helpful. However, negative effect was suggested on “grammar coding” and “explicit correction.” This study suggests that classroom teachers utilize a variety of corrective feedback on students’ writings depending on the foci of the assignments.

Introduction

In order to learn a foreign language, it is essential to focus on four skills, namely: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In some cases, cultural skills are also considered crucial. Unlike the traditional foreign language pedagogy in which students were exposed to excessive grammar translation or sentence pattern practices, languages have been widely taught in a framework of communicative approach, which concentrates on interpersonal meaning exchange rather than focusing exclusively on the grammatical form of language. It is a trend that classroom teachers attempt to enhance the four skills of learners’ language development through communicative approach. Due to the time limitation, however, classroom instruction tends to focus on speaking, listening, and some reading skills while writing components of language are usually tackled in a form of homework assignment.

In the case of learning Japanese as a foreign language (JFL), especially for native speakers of English or English cognates, acquiring a certain level of writing skills is highly challenging for its distinctive characters (e.g., *hiragana*, *katakana*, and Chinese characters) as well as organizational difference in writing. For example, Robert Kaplan argues that the organization of ideas in writing is culturally determined. For instance, English writing can be represented by a straight line with introductions, topic sentences, supporting information, and conclusions, whereas that in Japanese is represented by spiral circles toward the center—

the discussion starts from surrounding topics and the main idea is not disclosed until the very end of the writing.³

In one's developmental stages of language learning, whether it is his/her first language (L1) or second language (L2), or whether it is in a form of oral or written production, various non-native-like productions are inevitable, especially when there is a gap between learners' native languages and the target language (e.g., Japanese). When an error is identified, it is crucial for the instructors to provide necessary and appropriate feedback to learners' writings. However, such feedback should be provided in a way that it triggers learners' noticing and cognitive processes. In other words, simply providing the correct form, albeit helpful to some extent, may not encourage learners to think of what they did wrong and what the correct forms should be. Then, how should an instructor correct or respond to them? Questions on feedback like these have been the focus of study in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language acquisition (FLA) for the past three decades. Researchers have examined feedback—corrective or not—in L2 writing as to when it should be provided, who should provide it, how it should be done, on what features it should be provided, and learners' preferences for the types of teacher feedback, among other issues.

Literature Review

Writing feedback—does it work or not?

As the teaching methodology shifted from translation-based approach to a more communicative approach, speaking and listening skill learning has benefitted from “error correction” through meaningful communication. Learners notice what is incomprehensible by making mistakes and receiving corrective feedback from their interlocutors. The positive effects of oral corrective feedback have been reported extensively.⁴

Written corrective feedback, on the other hand, does not paint the same picture. More negative results have been reported by providing written “error correction.” For example, Zamel investigated types of teacher response to learner writing in an ESL setting and found that teacher

³ Robert B. Kaplan, “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education,” *Language Learning* 16 (1996): 1–20.

⁴ Sheen, “Introduction: The Role of Oral and Written Corrective Feedback in SLA.”

feedback (e.g., coding and comments) are often confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible. The teacher cannot always identify every single error and/or cannot always be consistent on what they correct.⁵ Furthermore, Leki claims that teachers tend to focus exclusively on the grammatical errors (e.g., individual vocabulary, short phrases, grammatical inflection) and fail to provide a holistic comment on the content of the texts.⁶

In Japanese education, Uchida argues that written corrective feedback does not provide children a sense of achievement and, in some cases, it may even be harmful for developing their thinking process.⁷ Further, Komiya points out that teachers often provide feedback for the parts that learners can correct by themselves.⁸

Such negative reaction to written feedback stems from the trend that feedback was provided after the text was completed. That is, there is no communication or negotiation during the writing. Thus, adaptation of a “process-oriented” model has been claimed and researched. In this framework, teachers play a role of assisting learners’ writing process by providing feedback in various stages (e.g., outline, revision), rather than correcting errors after the completion of the texts. Such process-oriented written feedback resulted in more positive results.

Ferris argues that “grammar correction” is indeed effective,⁹ claiming that feedback should be provided on all aspects of learners’ texts.¹⁰

⁵ Vivian Zamel, “Responding to Student Writing,” *TESOL Quarterly* 19/1 (1985): 79–101.

⁶ Ilona Leki, “Coaching from the Margins: Issues in Written Response,” in Barbara Kroll, ed., *Second Language Writing: Research Insights for the Classroom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 57–68.

⁷ Nobuko Uchida, *Kodomo no bunsyō. Kaku koto, Kangaeru koto* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1990).

⁸ Chizuko Komiya, “Suikō ni yoru sakubun shidō no kanōsei: gakusyūsha no nōryoku o ikashita teisei,” *Nihongo Kyōiku* 75 (1991): 124–134.

⁹ Dana, R. Ferris, “The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes: A Response to Truscott (1996),” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8/1 (1999): 1–11.

¹⁰ Dana, R. Ferris, “Responding to Writing,” in Barbara Kroll, ed., *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 119–140.

Ferris and Roberts compared three ESL groups: coding-, underlined-,¹¹ and no-feedback group, and found that both groups that received feedback significantly outperformed the “no feedback” group. Ishibashi investigated how learners perceive teachers' written feedback and found that the majority of learners consider provided feedback helpful and effective.¹²

What is an effective corrective feedback?

Although the justification and effectiveness of “grammar correction” are not yet resolved, the majority agrees that feedback is generally effective and beneficial in L2 writing, at least on content and organization. Then, the question is “What type of feedback is the most effective?” Many scholars have investigated different types of feedback on L2 writing: “explicit correction” (e.g., overtly indicating the erroneous part and providing the correct form), coding (e.g., indicating grammatical form with “GF,” spelling with “SP”), underlining, “comment on content,” and any combination of the above.

Kepner investigated intermediate Spanish learners' writings on the different effects of error-oriented feedback and message-oriented feedback. The results show that “error corrections” and rule reminders did not significantly improve students' written accuracy or quality of the content of their writing, whereas message-oriented comments showed a positive effect. Thus, Kepner concluded that “error correction” may not be as effective as message-oriented feedback.¹³

However, Chandler reports a positive effect of “explicit correction” in the ESL setting by comparing three groups: “explicit correction” group, underlining the location of error with coding, and only coding beside the

¹¹ Dana, R. Ferris and Barrie Roberts, “Error Feedback in L2 Writing Classes: How Explicit Does It Need To Be?” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 10 (2001): 161–184.

¹² Reiko Ishibashi, “Sansyutsu sakubun ni taisuru kyōshi no feedback—nihongo gakusyūsyā no ninshiki to taiō kara,” *Takusyoku University Nihongo Kiyō* 11 (2001): 89–98.

¹³ Christine G. Kepner, “An Experiment in the Relationship of Types of Written Feedback to the Development of L2 Writing Skills,” *The Modern Language Journal* 75/3 (1991): 305–313.

line in which the error exists, without indicating the location.¹⁴ It was shown that both the “explicit correction” group and the underlining with coding group were significantly more accurate than the group with only coding in the revision, with the best results obtained from the “explicit correction” group.

Although coding can be perceived ineffective due to its ambiguity,¹⁵ positive results have also been reported by researchers such as Ferris and Roberts. In their study an ESL setting, the coding group and the underlining feedback group significantly outperformed the group that did not receive any feedback.¹⁶ “Comment on content,” which focuses exclusively on the content and organization rather than the grammatical features has been reported effective not only on learner’s content, but also partially on learner’s grammar.¹⁷ However, it has also been suggested that teacher comments potentially cause confusion when learners find it ambiguous.¹⁸ A combination of the above feedback technique has been investigated in comparison with single feedback. For example, Fazio found

¹⁴ Jean Chandler, “The Efficacy of Various Kinds of Error Feedback for Improvement in the Accuracy and Fluency of L2 Student Writing,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 12 (2003), pp. 267–296.

¹⁵ Harriet D. Semke, “Effects of the Red Pen,” *Foreign Language Annals* 17/3 (1984), pp. 195–202; John Truscott, “The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes,” *Language Learning* 46/2 (1996): 327–369; John Truscott, “The Case for ‘The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes:’ a Response to Ferris”; and Vivian Zamel, “Responding to Student Writing.”

¹⁶ Dana R. Ferris and Barrie Roberts, “Error Feedback in L2 Writing Classes.”

¹⁷ Susan M. Conrad and Lynn M. Goldstein, “ESL Student Revision after Teacher-Written Comments: Text, Contexts, and Individuals,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8/2 (1999): 147–179; and Lucy L. Fazio, “The Effect of Corrections and Commentaries on the Journal Writing Accuracy of Minority- and Majority-Language Students,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 10/4 (2001), pp. 235–249.

¹⁸ Semke, “Effects of the Red Pen”; Truscott, “The Case for ‘The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes,’” (1999): 111–122; and Zamel, “Responding to Student Writing,” 79–101.

that a combination of “explicit correction” and “comment on content” is not significantly more effective than single mode of correction.¹⁹

Tim Ashwell, in a multiple draft setting, compared three groups: recommended pattern group (“comment on content” for the first draft, form-focused correction on the Second draft), reversed pattern group (form-focused correction followed by content-focused comment), and zero feedback group with EFL learners in a Japanese university, reporting that the recommended pattern did not produce a significant difference on the content score of the final product.²⁰

In addition to types of correction, it is claimed that teachers should be clear in order to facilitate learners' writing improvement, without appropriating their texts.²¹ In sum, research has shown that, in general, teacher feedback seems the most effective at the intermediate stage of learners' writing, and to be feedback, at least on content and organization, seems to have consistent positive effect on revision. In addition, although learners' preference for different types of feedback vary depending on the individual, and learners, especially in FL context, tend to consider feedback and revision as “grammar practice,” L2 and FL learners generally seem to perceive teacher feedback helpful to improve their writing skills. However, studies on the effectiveness of different types of feedback, namely, “explicit correction,” coding, underlining, “comment on content,” or any combination of the above, still have shown a number of different pictures in various research contexts. Moreover, such studies are almost exclusively on ESL or English-cognate language learning settings. Thus, it is premature to consider that previous findings are applicable to languages that are typologically different from English, such as Asian languages.

¹⁹ Lucy L. Fazio, “The Effect of Corrections and Commentaries.”

²⁰ Tim Ashwell, “Patterns of Teacher Response to Student Writing in a Multiple-Draft Composition Classroom: Is Content Feedback Followed by Form Feedback the Best Method?” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 9/3 (2000): 227–257.

²¹ Fiona Hyland, “The Impact of Teacher Written Feedback on Individual Writers,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 7/3 (1998): 255–286; and Fiona Hyland and Ken Hyland, “Sugaring the Pill: Praise and Criticism in Written Feedback,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 10 (2001): 185–212.

Therefore, this small case study investigates the effectiveness and learners' perceptions of different types of feedback on writing in a JFL setting. In so doing, the following research questions are advanced:

1. What is the impact of four different types of corrective feedback, namely—explicit correction, coding, “comment on content,” or a combination of coding and “comment on content”—on a learner’s subsequent production in terms of the amount of text (characters and T-units) and holistic rating of their writing?
2. How do intermediate-level JFL learners perceive various types of teacher feedback on their writing?

Method

Participants

The participants consist of four college students at the third-year level Japanese, who agreed to volunteer in this study with no relation to their coursework. They were 3 males and one female, and all native speakers of English. Moreover, there is no notable difference in terms of linguistic (oral or written) or communicative skills between the four participants. It should also be noted that participant A is much older (42 years old) while other three participants are either 20 or 21 years old.

Procedures

The data collection procedures were completed within two weeks.

1. Assignment of the task:
The participants were asked to write a letter to their pen pals about a given topic, “The Worst Trip,” in 30 minutes. Use of a dictionary or any other sources were not allowed. In addition, the participants were specifically instructed to use a neutral polite form, *desu/masu*. The reason that the neutral form was chosen for the task is because the participants are familiar with this form compared to other forms, such as casual forms. It is important to use a cognitively less difficult form to encourage the participants to produce as much text as possible, given the time constraint.
2. Feedback on texts:
The four types of feedback, namely, “explicit correction,” “comment on content,” “grammar coding,” and a combination of

“comment and coding,” were provided by the researcher. Although there are many more feedback techniques examined in the previous studies (e.g., underlining without indicating the location of an error), these four types were chosen in this particular study for two reasons: (a) the foci of much research have been either one or more of these four, and (b) these four types of feedback are widely used in the Japanese language program at collegiate level in the United States.

The definition of each type of feedback is as follows: “explicit correction” specifically identifies the location of the error, and the correct form or vocabulary is provided. For “comment on content,” “tell-me-more” type of technique was mainly used, as well as general comments. In this respect, it can both be corrective (e.g., identifying what is missing or what should be incorporated in a text), and noncorrective (e.g., stating a general comment, such as “I like the way you describe the scary situation!”). Coding is a type of corrective feedback that specifically indicates the location of an error, with a symbol that indicates what type of error it is. In this study, 10 symbols were used: “GC” for grammar choice, “SP” for spelling, “P” for particle, “>” for missing element, “Fm” for grammar form, “Kj” for Kanji (Chinese characters), “T” for tense, “WC” for word choice, “AWK” for awkward sentence or wording, and “?” for incomprehensible item.

3. Revision:
Upon completion of the holistic rating and written feedback, the first drafts were returned to the participants. The participants were instructed to rewrite the letter and submit both the first draft and the revised text within 48 hours. There was no time requirement, and they could refer to any sources such as the dictionary, textbook, Internet, etc.
4. Interview:
Finally, the researcher interviewed each participant within 48 hours from receiving the revised text. Each interview, which was audio-taped, lasted from 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the participants. The questions asked about (a) the perception about the particular feedback that he or she received, (b) the participants' beliefs about, or preferences for, types of feedback, (c) the

participants' habits of revision, and (d) the student's specific revision for the task in this study.

Analyses

In order to answer the research questions, the following analyses were implemented for both the first draft and the revised texts: counting the number of T-units and characters, and holistic rating.

1. The number of T-units:

For a T-unit, Cooper's definition is adopted in this study.²² According to Cooper, a T-unit is a main clause and any subordinate or non-clausal structure either embedded or attached. It should also be noted that a compound sentence is counted as two T-units. For example, the sentence in (1), which is excerpted from the data, is considered to have two T-units:

- a) *sono toki, ani-wa nyūyōku-ni sunde ita node,*
that time older brother-TOP New York-
LOC was living thus

watashi-wa eki-kara apato-ni tsureteitte morai-mashita
I-TOP station-from apartment-to take receive an action-
PAST

*(Lit.) That time, my brother lived in N.Y. thus, I received
an action of taking me from the station to his apartment
by a car.*

“Back then, since my brother lived in N.Y., he gave me a ride from the station to his apartment.”

T-units were counted both in the first and the second draft for each participant's text, and compared to examine if there was any increase or decrease in the total number.

²² Charles R. Cooper, “Studying the Writing Abilities of a University Freshman Class,” in Richard Beach and Lillian S. Bridwell, eds., *New Directions in Composition Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 1984), pp. 19–52.

2. The number of characters:
Characters counted were any Japanese characters; *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji* (Chinese characters), and Roman alphabet abbreviations widely used in Japan, such as "P.S." for postscript.
3. Holistic rating:
Upon the completion of each draft, the researcher collected the texts and had two native speakers of Japanese rate them separately. The two raters were teaching assistants for the first-year JFL course. The two raters had never taught any of the participants, and thus, there should have been no bias on the participants' linguistic/rhetoric ability in Japanese.

Moreover, the texts were rated based on the content (maximum of 30 points), organization (maximum of 20 points), grammar (maximum of 25 points), vocabulary (maximum of 20 points) and mechanics (maximum of 5 points), using Hedgcock and Lefkowitz's 100 point-scale criteria (see Appendix A). First, the two raters graded each text separately. Then, their scores were compared, the discrepancies in each category were discussed and, finally, one score for each category was determined for each text in 100% agreement between the two raters.

Results

For the first research question, the results on the change between the first draft and the revision in terms of the number of T-units show that the combination of "grammar coding" and "comment on content" contributed to the largest increase of T-units in the participant's subsequent text. "Grammar coding" only, on the other hand, had a slightly negative effect on the number of T-units. These results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

	Combination		Coding		Comment		Explicit	
	<i>First draft</i>	<i>Rev.</i>						
# of T-units	48	62 (+14)	31	30 (-1)	42	47 (+5)	23	29 (+6)

Table 1. The number of T-units between the 1st draft and the revision for each feedback type.

As shown in Table 1, 48 T-units were identified in the texts produced by the participants who received the combination of coding and “comment on coding;” 31 T-units for the one who received grammar coding only; 42 T-units for the one who received “comment on content” only; and 23 T-units for the one who was provided “explicit correction” only. The largest increase in the number of T-units was attributed to the combination of coding and comment, in response to which the participant produced 14 more T-units in the subsequent text. However, coding seems to have the least (or even a slight negative effect) on the number of T-units in the revision. The participant who received coding feedback produced fewer T-units, but the difference was subtle, by only one less T-unit.

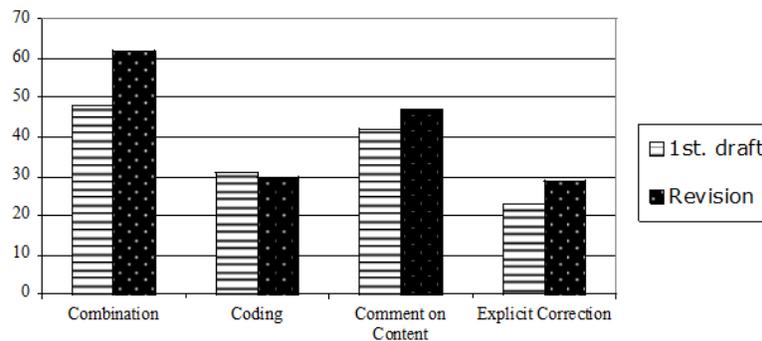


Figure 1. The change in the number of T-units between the 1st draft and the revision.

Furthermore, although “comment on content” and “explicit correction” contributed to a gain in the number of T-units, no notable difference was observed between these two (an increase of 5 more T-units and 6 more T-units, respectively).

	Combination		Coding		Comment		Explicit	
	<i>First draft</i>	<i>Rev.</i>	<i>First draft</i>	<i>Rev.</i>	<i>First draft</i>	<i>Rev.</i>	<i>First draft</i>	<i>Rev.</i>
<i># of charac</i>	629	817 (+188)	432	416 (-16)	547	657 (+110)	280	361 (+81)

Table 2. The number of characters between the 1st draft and the revision for each feedback type.

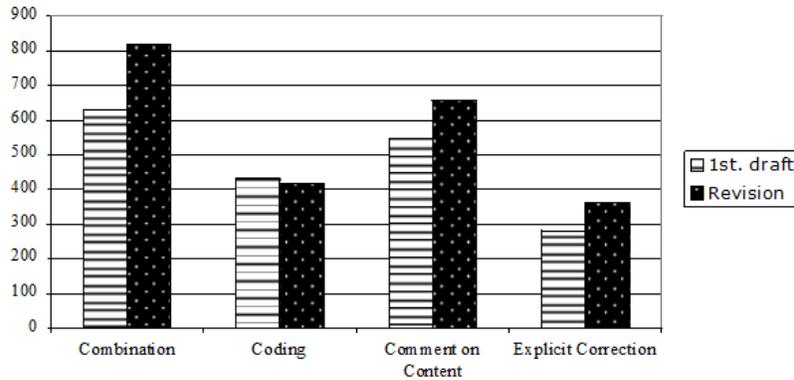


Figure 2. The change in the number of character between the first draft and the revision

Table 2 shows that the combination, comment, and “explicit correction” contributed to the gain of characters. The largest increase was from the combination (+188) followed by comment (+110) and “explicit correction” (+81). Coding, however, did not encourage the participant to produce more characters. It even affected negatively, albeit only slightly, the total number of characters in the subsequent revision (-16). In addition, as was the case for the number of T-units, there was no remarkable difference observed between the increase from comment and from “explicit correction” (110 and 81, respectively). These results are also shown in Figure 2 above.

Another focus of the first research question is the effect of each type of feedback on the holistic rating. Table 3 below shows the scores for the five categories and the overall scores of the first draft and the revision for each type of feedback.

	Combination		Coding		Comment		Explicit	
	<i>First draft</i>	<i>Rev.</i>						
Content (30pts.)	25	27 (+2)	26	25 (-1)	20	26 (+6)	25	25 (+0)
Organization (20pts.)	15	18 (+3)	17	18 (+1)	15	17 (+2)	14	18 (+4)

Grammar (25pts.)	16	19 (+3)	16	21 (+5)	11	17 (+6)	14	22 (+8)
Vocabulary (20pts.)	15	17 (+2)	17	18 (+1)	14	17 (+3)	16	18 (+2)
Mechanics (5pts.)	2	2 (+0)	2	2 (+0)	3	3 (+0)	3	4 (+1)
Overall	73	83 (+10)	77	84 (+7)	63	80 (+17)	72	87 (+15)

Table 3. The holistic rating scores in the first draft and the revision on each type of feedback.

In terms of the overall scores, all participants improved their writing. “Comment on content” contributed to the largest increase in the holistic rating (+17), followed by “explicit correction” (+15 points) and the combination (+10). Coding was to the least effective feedback (+7).

Taking a closer look on each category, “comment on content” was the most effective feedback for the improvement of content (+6), while other feedback had a slightly positive or negative effect (+2 from combination, -1 from coding, and no effect from “explicit correction”). “Explicit correction” led to the largest improvement on grammar (+8), while other feedback was also found effective (+3 from combination, +5 from coding, and +6 from comment). These two results were expected as these are the focus of the feedback—comment on content focuses on the content of the text, and explicit correction provides the correct forms on the erroneous forms. These types of feedback indeed enhance what they purport to enhance.

For the second research question, each participant was interviewed to obtain their beliefs about, or preferences for, types of feedback, and how they usually tackle the subsequent revision. Their opinions are given in Appendix B (both direct quotes and translations from Japanese).

In general, teacher feedback—corrective or noncorrective—is perceived as helpful by all participants. There were individual differences in terms of his or her preferences and the focus of their concern. For example, Participant A, who received the combination, thinks all feedback is beneficial except for “explicit correction.” “Explicit correction,” according to Participant A, does not encourage learners to think what is wrong with the erroneous item. Participant C, who received comment on content, pointed out that “explicit correction” is beneficial for the beginning-level

learners, while more advanced learners should be able to think and figure out what is wrong with a sentence, at least for some of the errors. Participant D, who received “explicit correction,” is fond of “explicit correction” the most, while appreciating other types of feedback, as well.

In addition, all participants usually use other sources such as the dictionary or the textbook to help their revision. Whereas one participant indicated that coding could be confusing because learners sometimes forget what they mean, others think that coding is very straightforward and clear, as long as the list of codes is provided.

Discussion

In sum, the results show the positive effect of comment on content for improving the content, and of “explicit correction” for grammar. In addition, comments on content contributed to an increase in the holistic score the most. The results also show that the combination of coding and comment on content encourages learners to produce more texts. Coding, on the other hand, was found to be the least effective feedback; it even negatively affected the amount of production. These findings were similar to the previous findings.²³ However, there were two cases that seem unique in the present study: (a) there was no notable difference between comment on content and “explicit correction” in the increase of T-units and characters, and (b) there was an improvement on the organization from “explicit correction,” although the improvement was subtle.

The Effectiveness of Different Types of Feedback: Two Cases

In the first case, it was surprising because the two types of feedback in question—“comment on content” and “explicit correction”—are often considered as opposite types of feedback, and yet, the results show a similar effect on the amount of text in the participants' revisions. The interview with each participant revealed that comment on content did not lead to longer text because the participant felt such feedback was not relevant to anything other than the topic of the writing, while the “explicit correction” seemed to encourage the writer to fix only what had been

²³ Chandler, “The Efficacy of Various Kinds of Error Feedback”; and Ferris and Roberts, “Error Feedback in L2 Writing Classes: How Explicit Does It Need To Be?”

corrected. In the interview session, Participant C, specifically stated as follows:

Some of the comments on content didn't really fit what I wanted, so I don't really add anything even if the teacher commented on that. Like some of the comment says "tell me more about your friend," but this letter is about my worst trip. My friend is not the main concern, so I just skipped the comment here. (Participant C)

Participant C, according to the follow-up interview, did not add any elaboration because she considered providing detailed information about, her friend, for example, not relevant to the topic of the letter. In other words, she thought that providing detailed information about what actually happened during her worst trip was important, while giving background information about her friend or the town in which the event took place seemed irrelevant. Thus, her subsequent revision was not notably longer than the first draft.

On the other hand, Participant D, who received "explicit correction," did not mention the reason why he did not produce a significantly longer text in his revision. However, comparing his first draft and the revision, the elaboration of new information was absent. That is, Participant D simply substituted the original errors with the correct forms without producing longer text.

Therefore, comment on content may encourage learners to produce longer text when the writer perceives it relevant enough to elaborate new information, while "explicit correction" may not have a sufficient effect to encourage learners to further elaborate. Rather, a writer may focus only on what is grammatically correct. This finding is similar to that in Fazio's 2001 study, where there was no significant difference between "explicit correction" and "comment on content." She argues that part of the reason is the nature of the task. In her study, the journal entry was highly content-oriented which might have overshadowed the focus of feedback. It may be the case in this study that Participant C paid attention exclusively to what she thought was the topic of the letter, and thus the other features were overshadowed.

The second case concerns the reason why "explicit correction" led to an improvement in organization, even though it is by no means the focus of this particular feedback. This is due to the fact that Participant D did not

finish his writing in the first draft within the time constraint, and hence, the end of the letter was incomplete. Instead, he abruptly wrapped up the letter by simply putting a farewell remark *sayōnara* “Goodbye” at the end of his writing. This is one of the reasons that participant D received the lowest score on the organization in his first draft (14 points). In his revision with no time constraint, although he finished his writing, he did not add any further elaboration. Rather, he finished the last sentence and made the final remark little longer from *sayōnara* to *sayonara; ogenkide; mata au no o tanoshimi ni shite imasu*. “Good-bye. Take care. I am looking forward to seeing you again.”

Learners' Perception: Three Cases

Although all participants generally consider teacher feedback helpful, more detailed examination leads to three interesting cases: the grammar-oriented mind, what should be commented on content, and feedback-driven revision.

The first issue refers to the participants' mental orientation to grammar, rather than on content. Three participants mentioned that grammar was their main concern, and therefore, the participants tended to think that they needed feedback on grammar, such as coding and “explicit correction.”

“I usually start with the grammar correction because it is easier to fix.” (Participant A)

“I definitely think grammar feedback is more important than comment on content, because grammar is my main concern.” (Participant B)

“I mostly think about grammar first.” (Participant C)

One participant, on the other hand, specifically indicated that the content is more important than grammar at the initial stage of the writing.

“Content is the first thing I look at. Because if I can't express myself correctly, it doesn't matter what grammar I have in there (the text).” (Participant D)

Although this might be a highly individual preference, grammar tended to be the main focus, at least for the majority of the participants in this study. This is supported by Hedgcock and Lefkowitz that FL learners, compared to ESL learners, displayed distinctly form-focused attention, rather than content. Given all foreign languages in their study were English cognates (German, French, and Spanish) and still such grammar-oriented tendency was observed, it was not surprising that a similar, or perhaps even stronger, trend was observed in a Japanese language learning setting.²⁴

Second, although comment on content may be ignored depending on what is commented on, such feedback may at least encourage learners to elaborate more information in their subsequent revisions. Looking at the Participant C's comment again:

Some of the comments on content didn't really fit what I wanted, so I don't really add anything even if the teacher commented on that. Like some of the comment says, 'tell me more about your friend,' but this letter is about my worst trip. My friend is not the main concern here, so I just skipped the comment here.

The comment "tell me more about your friend" was given due to the fact that the "friend" in the text appeared abruptly without any background information. However, Participant C decided to discard this feedback because the main focus is "the worst trip," not detailed information about a friend. It might have been the case that she thought giving detailed information about her friend was too personal for the task. Either way, comment on content was considered unnecessary.

However, teachers should comment on content, rather than not commenting on anything at all. As shown above, comment on content indeed had a positive effect on the amount of T-units and characters, and also the overall improvement, measured by the holistic rating. Interestingly,

²⁴ John Hedgcock and Natalie Lefkowitz, "Feedback on Feedback: Assessing Learner Receptivity to Teacher Response in L2 Composing," *Journal and Second Language Writing* 3/2 (1994): 141-163; and John Hedgcock and Natalie Lefkowitz, "Input on Input: Two Analyses of Student Response to Expert Feedback in L2 Writing," *The Modern Language Journal* 80/3 (1996): 287-308.

Participants B and D, who did not receive comment on content, said that such feedback is helpful.

“Comment on content would be helpful for me to find what’s missing in my writing.” (Participant B)

“Comment on content can be helpful.” (Participant D)

Although whether or not these two participants benefit from comment on content is inconclusive in this study, all participants indicated that teacher comments are helpful to improve their writing. Despite the ambiguity of comment on content has been reported in the previous studies,²⁵ in this case, the issue on comment on content was the relevance to the topic of the task. There seemed to be a gap between what a writer intended to focus on and what a feedback provider wanted to know as an audience (or as a language instructor). As the information to be emphasized highly depends on the type of writing, further investigation with various writing tasks is needed to shed light on how comment on content impacts writers in different writing contexts.

The third point is that the learners tended to focus exclusively on the focus of the feedback, and other features tended to be either ignored or not noticed. This tendency is also supported from the interview sessions; three participants, explicitly or implicitly, indicated that they usually attended mainly to the focus of feedback while uncommented issues were not considered.

“I added more information because the feedback said I needed to. I absolutely wouldn’t add any further elaboration if there is no feedback as to the content.” (Participant A)

“I basically go through the correction and correct all the grammar errors. I usually just follow the corrections that are made.” (Participant B)

²⁵ Dana. R. Ferris, “Student Reactions to Teacher Response in Multiple-Draft Composition Classrooms,” *TESOL Quarterly* 29/1 (1995): 33–53; and Zamel, “Responding to Student Writing.”

“I didn’t add anything because I thought nothing was missing, based on the feedback.” (Participant B)

“I generally don’t think about content too much, as long as it makes sense to me. If it doesn’t make any sense, teachers would write something anyway.” (Participant C)

Indeed, Participant D, who received explicit correction, did not add or change anything other than the focus of correction. This might be attributed to the characteristic of the target language. Even for the participants who are in the third-year level, their literacy skills were much less proficient than their L1 literacy skills. Consequently, the learner’s internal literacy mechanism is insufficient to judge the correctness and appropriateness of their texts. Additional examination of the different proficiency levels should provide a better picture, especially the consistency of this tendency in a JFL setting.

Conclusion

This study is meaningful for attempting to reveal the effectiveness of and the learners’ perceptions about different types of written feedback in a JFL context, which has not yet been investigated extensively. The results show that (a) comment on content had a positive effect on the improvement on content, (b) explicit correction was effective on grammar improvement, (c) comment on content impacted on the holistic score, (d) the combination of coding and comment on content invited more text, and (e) coding was the least effective feedback overall.

In addition, some of the peculiar cases observed in this study were discussed. First, there was no significant difference between comment on content and explicit correction on the amount of text in the subsequent revision. The interview revealed that four out of six “tell-me-more” type of comments were ignored by Participant C, who considered them irrelevant to the topic of the letter. Second, slight improvement on organization was observed from explicit correction only because Participant D had not finished the first draft, given the time constraint. Third, it was found that the learners are grammar-oriented, rather than content-oriented. Fourth, relating to the second issue, what should be commented on depends on the individual, the type of task, or how the work is commented on (“tell-me-more,” pointing out what should be elaborated, etc.). Fifth, most of the changes or corrections the participants made were feedback-driven. If an

error or content issue is not commented on, it tends to be either ignored or unnoticed.

Despite the results, this study, just like any other study, is not limitation-free. The most notable limitation is the small sample size—only four participants were involved. Thus, the findings are a highly individual representation. For example, as shown above, Participant A was much older and mature than the others, showing willingness to participate in this study the most. This might affect the length and the quality of the text. In addition, each participant's class schedule varied tremendously. For example, Participant C was enrolled in five courses whereas participant A was enrolled only in two courses. Given that it was completely voluntary participation, and the task was given at the end of the semester, the time spent for the revision might have been affected by the schoolwork.

Second, in the same vein, the results cannot be considered a representation of the JFL learners. Examining more subjects with more proficiency levels and the subsequent quantitative analyses to see if the findings are statistically significant should be implemented. Last but not least, the present study only analyzed the data in terms of the number of T-units and characters, and the holistic scores of the texts. However, the quality or the improvement of the texts should also be measured by other factors, such as the complexity of the sentences or vocabulary/kanji to paint a better picture with respect to the impact of corrective feedback on the learners' writings.

As a final note, I hope that this investigation sheds light on the effectiveness of written feedback, specifically in a JFL contest, and triggers other researchers or classroom teachers to consider how feedback should be provided in order to enhance learners' writing skills.

**Appendix A. Essay Rating Scale: Foreign Language
Composition Profile (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992)**

	Score	Criteria
Content	27-30	<i>Excellent to very good:</i> knowledgeable; substantive, thorough development of thesis; relevant to topic assigned.
	22-26	<i>Good to average:</i> some knowledge of subject; adequate range; limited thematic development; mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail.
	17-21	<i>Fair to poor:</i> limited knowledge of subject; minimal substance; poor thematic development.
	13-16	<i>Very poor:</i> shows little or no knowledge of subject; inadequate quantity; not relevant, or not enough to rate.
Organization	18-20	<i>Excellent to very good:</i> fluent expression; clear statement of ideas; solid support; clear organization; logical and cohesive sequencing.
	14-17	<i>Good to average:</i> adequate fluency; main ideas clear but loosely organized; supporting material limited; sequencing logical but incomplete.
	10-13	<i>Fair to poor:</i> low fluency; ideas not well connected; logical sequencing and development lacking.
	7-9	<i>Very poor:</i> ideas not communicated; organization lacking, or not enough to rate.
Grammar	22-25	<i>Excellent to very good:</i> accurate use of relatively complex structures; few errors in agreement, number, tense, word order, articles, pronouns, prepositions.
	18-21	<i>Good to average:</i> simple constructions used effectively; some problems in use of complex constructions; errors in agreement, number, tense, word order, articles, pronouns, prepositions.
	11-17	<i>Fair to poor:</i> significant defects in use of complex constructions; frequent errors in

		agreement, number, tense, negation, word order, articles, pronouns, prepositions; fragments and deletions; lack of accuracy interferes with meaning.
	5-10	<i>Very poor</i> : no mastery of simple sentence construction; text dominated by errors; does not communicate, or not enough to rate.
Vocabulary	18-20	<i>Excellent to very good</i> : complex range; accurate word/idiom choice; mastery of word forms; appropriate register.
	14-17	<i>Good to average</i> : adequate range; errors of word/idiom choice; effective transmission of meaning.
	10-13	<i>Fair to poor</i> : limited range; frequent word/idiom errors; inappropriate choice, usage; meaning not effectively communicated.
	7-9	<i>Very poor</i> : translation-based errors; little knowledge of target language vocabulary, or not enough to rate.
Mechanics	5	<i>Excellent to very good</i> : masters conventions of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraph indentation, etc.
	4	<i>Good to average</i> : occasional errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraph indentation, etc., which do not interfere with meaning.
	3	<i>Fair to poor</i> : frequent spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing errors; meaning disrupted by formal problems.
	2	<i>Very poor</i> : no mastery of conventions due to frequency of mechanical errors, or not enough to rate.
Total		___/100

Note: This scale was adapted from *Composición, Proceso y Síntesis* by Guadalupe Valdes and Trista Dvorak, 1989, New York: McGraw-Hill. Copyright 1989 by McGraw-Hill, Inc. (Original version in Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, and Hughey, 1981.)

Appendix B. Opinions obtained from the interview session

Subject A: Combination

- I usually start with the grammar correction because it is easier to fix. Then, sometimes I think about thematic issues. Easy ones to more difficult ones.
- I use a dictionary if I have to so I can look up Chinese characters, vocabulary and stuff.
- I added more information because the feedback said I needed to. I absolutely wouldn't add any further elaboration if there is no feedback as to the content.
- I think I wouldn't be able to fix many of my grammar errors if I only receive comments on content.
- Coding is absolutely helpful because it is specific. But sometimes I forget the coding system itself.
- Explicit correction wouldn't help me much. I just copy whatever it is, without thinking about it. Also, often times, explicit correction slightly changes the meaning.
- Combination is fine.

Subject B: Coding only

- I basically go through the correction and correct all the grammar errors. I usually just follow the corrections that are made.
- I usually use a dictionary. Sometimes I pull out a textbook from previous courses.
- I didn't really add any information. I pretty much changed the form and words.
- Comment on content would be helpful for me to find what's missing in my writing. I didn't add anything because I thought nothing was missing, based on the feedback.
- I definitely think grammar feedback is more important than comment on content, because grammar is my main concern.
- Coding is pretty clear as long as I have the chart that explains which code means what.

Subject C: Comment on content only

- I generally read through everything teachers put, and start fixing small errors, like particles, spelling, something like that.
- I mostly think about grammar first.
- I generally don't think about content too much, as long as it makes sense to me. If it doesn't make any sense, teachers would write something anyway.
- I personally think coding is a little more helpful, because mostly I care about my grammar more than content.
- Explicit correction would be fine for the beginning level. But as you get more proficient, you should be able to think and figure about what's wrong, at least for some of the errors.
- Since this is a letter, content might be more important than grammar, so the kind of feedback we need depends on what we are writing.
- I mostly changed what the teacher commented on. I didn't really add much information.
- Some of the comments on content didn't really fit what I wanted, so I don't really add anything even if the teacher commented on that. Like some of the comment says "tell me more about your friend," but this letter is about my worst trip. My friend is not the main concern here, so I just skipped the comment here.
- Too much correction discourages me, so it would be nice to have some positive remark once in a while.

Subject D: Explicit correction

- Generally, I look at all the feedback for grammatical errors.
- I usually add more sentences, vocabulary items, and grammar features to make more sense.
- I generally use both dictionary and textbook.
- I generally find this kind of feedback (explicit correction) more helpful. Since I am not a native speaker, sometimes I don't really know what the right form is, so, often times, it is easier if you give me what it is supposed to be.
- Coding is also helpful, but sometimes it's confusing because I forget what some of the coding mean.

- Comment on content can be helpful. But if I don't know what I'm doing wrong (grammatically), there is no way I can fix that.
- Content is the first thing I look at, because if I can't express myself correctly, it doesn't matter what grammar I have in there. It doesn't make any sense.