

University Master's Degree for Secondary Education,  
Vocational Training and Language Teaching



# **Corrective Feedback on Written Errors: A Study on Learners' Individual Factors**

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“It is not the presence or absence of feedback that makes a difference,  
but its nature and quality”  
(Swaffield, 2008)

# Abstract

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During the past decades, the importance of corrective feedback (CF, henceforth) in foreign language acquisition has been widely studied. Although there are no conclusive studies, this paper defends the relevance of high-quality written CF in the teaching-learning process. Although factors influencing the effectiveness of CF are still not clear, Sheen (2011) argues that apart from linguistic and contextual factors, students' individual factors should also be taken into consideration. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, "high-quality" feedback is considered as the one taking students' individual factors into account in order to maximise its benefits.

The objective of this paper is to verify whether or not foreign language (FL) teachers take learners' individual factors into account when providing written CF. The study has been carried out in Ágora Lledó International School in Castellón (Spain). This centre has been chosen because their educational project is based on the latest pedagogical tendencies. Hence, analysing the quality of teachers' feedback in this context is highly revealing.

In order to do so, 198 writings from classrooms with different profiles have been analysed. We have focused the study on two class groups. The first group is one from 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education and the second one is studying 2<sup>nd</sup> year of national Baccalaureate. Three factors have been taken into account: age, language proficiency and interest in the subject.

The main conclusion is that age is taken into account when providing CF, which is the main difference between the two class groups. Nevertheless, other individual factors such as students' proficiency in English and their interest in the subject are not taken into account although scholars recommend to do so (Sheen, 2011; Pawlaw, 2012). Therefore, in order to maximise feedback effect on students, teachers should take into consideration learners' individual factors and this is why a pedagogical proposal is presented at the end of this paper.



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# Introduction

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Nowadays, corrective feedback (CF, henceforth) is considered one of the fundamental aspects in foreign language learning and essential to develop students' written skills (Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Sheen, 2011). This paper focuses on written CF because of the importance of the writing skill when learning a foreign language. It has been proved that writing promotes learning (Karpicke and Blunt, 2011). In fact, well-formed writing is one of the practices allowing students to learn effectively a language because it implies a "high-level recall, organised thinking and clear expression" (Monaghan, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. In other words, students recall knowledge when they are writing, instead of just using the language in a passive way.

Even though feedback is considered fundamental, FL teachers often have a sense that they are not making use of its potential (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). This feeling is understandable because feedback might have limited value if students do not read the teacher's corrections or if feedback does not adapt to students' characteristics. This is the reason why this paper seeks to establish the most appropriate ways of giving feedback in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes depending on students' individual factors. To do so, it is imperative to identify which types of feedback are more appropriate in certain class groups taking into account certain factors such as students' age, language level and overall interest in the subject. Bearing these characteristics in mind when providing feedback may help teachers to optimise their time and students' performance may be improved.

In Chapter 1, a theoretical framework on corrective feedback is presented. Surprisingly, the literature on CF has not always been positive about the role of feedback in foreign language acquisition (Truscott, 1996). This section seeks to answer some of the most controversial questions discussed over the last decades, such as which errors should be corrected. Different studies are presented to support the idea that errors should be corrected in order to improve students'

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://www.betterwritingfeedback.com>

accuracy and avoid fossilization of errors. Furthermore, questions such as when and who should provide feedback to students are also discussed in this section.

In Chapter 2, the most common types of feedback are listed. This section includes general error correction, content critique, proximate and holistic feedback and direct and indirect feedback. Besides, different ways to provide both direct and indirect feedback are discussed. This section is relevant in order to understand which types of feedback are more recommendable depending on students' characteristics.

In Chapter 3, a comparative study about written corrective feedback is presented. This study has been conducted with two different groups of students at Ágora Lledó International School, an educational centre located in Castellón (Spain). This centre has been chosen because their educational project is based in the latest pedagogical tendencies. This study focuses on students in 1<sup>st</sup> year of Second Compulsory Education (12-13 years old students) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of International Baccalaureate (17-18 years old students). The main objective of this study is to prove that students' age, proficiency level and interest in the subject should be taken into account when providing CF in order to improve its usefulness.

Finally, the last section explains the main conclusions emerging from the study, together with the limitations and further research.

# Chapter 1: Corrective feedback in foreign language teaching

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## 1.1 Definition of key concepts

In the field of foreign language acquisition (FLA), feedback is interpreted as a teacher's technique that allows students to know how they are doing (Good and Brophy, 2000). It is argued that feedback should be given whether students' response is correct or incorrect (*Ibid*). Specifically, this study focuses on a specific type of feedback: corrective feedback. This concept may be defined as an "indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 171). For the purposes of this paper, feedback refers specifically to written corrective feedback while "high-quality" feedback is the type of feedback that takes students' individual factors into account in order to maximise its benefits. A priori this process offers students specific and clear guidance of how they can improve their own performance (Monaghan, 2012).

Besides, the difference between "error" and "mistake" has to be stated. On the one hand, an "error" is an incorrect use of the language made by the learner due to a lack of grammatical knowledge (Brown, 1994). On the other hand, a "mistake" is an incorrect use of language made by the students although he or she knows the grammar rules. They can be due to fatigue, carelessness or slips of the tongue, among others. In order to establish the adequacy to correct mistakes and errors in foreign language teaching, a theoretical framework is presented in the following section.

## 1.2 Should students' errors be corrected?

Over the past decades, an important amount of research on teachers' written CF has focused on error correction. Feedback is widely considered as essential for "encouraging and consolidating learning" (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 83). One may think beforehand that feedback is always positive and necessary. Nevertheless, research in the 1980s and early 1990s started questioning the

effectiveness of CF “as a way of improving students’ writing” (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 84). Moreover, it was also studied if feedback was counter-productive for L2 students and their writing skills.

In 1996, Truscott argued that grammatical corrective feedback was not useful in the L2 teaching-learning process. According to him, teachers and researchers were wrong when taking the benefits of correction for granted. More importantly, he insisted that grammar correction in L2 writing classes “should be abandoned” (Truscott, 1996: 328) because it was both ineffective and harmful for language students. Regarding improving students’ accuracy, he stated that students would naturally improve their accuracy in the L2 through “extensive experience with the target language” (*Ibid*).

The idea of corrective feedback being inefficient or harmful sounds pessimistic and Truscott was not the only scholar to defend this idea. Two decades before, Cohen and Robbins carried out a study on CF in second language acquisition and they came to the conclusion that “corrections did not seem to have any significant effect on students’ errors” (Cohen and Robbins, 1976: 50). Later on, Semke (1984) published a study about different types of feedback with similar results and she defended that feedback was unhelpful to learners. Many other studies supported this idea of grammar being useless and harmful. For instance, Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) used different types of feedback –explicit feedback, correction code, highlighting, and marginal tally of the number of errors in each line– but not significant difference was found in students’ writing ability after using them (Robb et al., 1986).

At the beginning of the 1990s, other scholars were also influenced by this theory and agreed with this idea of feedback being discouraging for students (Leki, 1990; Kepner 1991; Krashen, 1992; Sheppard, 1992). One of the most interesting studies was the one carried out by Sheppard (1992). He experimented with two groups: one received feedback merely about the errors in their writings and the other focused on the content of their writing, not grammar. Any advantage for the first group was found and the content group had better results overall. However, both groups improved in accuracy of verb forms to some extent (Sheppard, 1992).

Thus, studies published during the 1980s and early 1990s indicated that grammar correction was useless or harmful in foreign language teaching.

Nevertheless, Truscott recognized that “other factors could have influenced the results of the experiments” (1996: 334). The results obtained from the aforementioned studies were not categorical or conclusive. He argued that some of the factors analysed were different from some studies to others. In the first place, students’ origin and first language (L1) were not always taken into account. Secondly, the form of correction implemented in each study varied from one study to the other. Some researchers preferred direct forms of correction whereas others opted for indirect feedback; others used both methods.

Thirdly, another reason to understand such negative results was due to the poor quality of feedback (Connors and Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 2003). The given feedback was “was frequently misunderstood by students, being vague, inconsistent and authoritarian” (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 84). Finally, Truscott argued that that CF may have a “delayed effect” and that was the reason for such pessimistic conclusions (Truscott, 1996). In other words, the benefits of written feedback could perhaps been shown in the long run. Consequently, the aforementioned negative results only showed that grammar correction did not work at least in any form available at that time. Hence, it did not mean that CF was inherently useless or harmful.

In the late 1990s, scholars starting publishing papers demonstrating that the lack of effectiveness of corrective feedback was not conclusive (Polio, 1997; Ferris, 1999; 2004). Most of them agreed that providing CF to L2 students is key in the teaching-learning process because it offers students clear and specific guidance of how to improve their performance (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). For instance, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) carried out a meta-analysis about the feedback process and they found that the effect of corrective feedback was very positive. The difference between these studies and the previous ones can be explained if one understands that in the 1980s “feedback research was in its infancy” and “studies were fairly rudimentary” (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 84).

Most recent studies have shown that there is a direct connection between correction and improvement of students’ language skills (Alcón, 2000; Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Salazar and Martí, 2010; Sheen, 2011). Feedback is considered as “crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning” (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 83). Fathman and Whalley (1990) found positive evidence when students rewrote

the feedback they had received on grammar and content. Later on, Master (1995) proved that teachers' correction was more effective if it was combined with classroom discussions about the errors students had made. Additionally, Ferris (2006) discovered that around 80% of students in her study successfully edited errors marked by L2 teachers in posterior draft. Only a 10% of the students made incorrect changes.

Most importantly, it has recently been argued that written CF is necessary for students to avoid "fossilization" of errors. Fossilization is defined as the "process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot be easily corrected" (British Council, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, fossilised errors are difficult to amend. What is more, they may never be corrected unless students are corrected in time. This is a strong reason to support the idea that CF is necessary to some extent in order to gain accuracy in students' foreign language.

Another reason to support CF as a necessary tool in the foreign language classroom is that nowadays there are more feedback-related techniques than in the 80s. This can be an indicator of its usefulness in the L2 classroom (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Another important thing to take into account is the reluctance of the majority of foreign language teachers to follow Truscott's advice. Foreign language teachers consider that accuracy when writing is essential in academic and professional settings (Johns, 1995; James 1998). Moreover, they feel that they are expected to respond to their students' needs, students who normally think that "error-free" writings are a good indicator of their improvement in their L2 (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). As a matter of fact, students usually expect to be commented on their written errors and they do not feel at ease if their teacher does not provide feedback (Cumming, 1995; Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Lee, 2004).

Mattisson (2014) focused on written corrective feedback and claimed that constructive feedback is always useful for both teachers and students. In her opinion, a teacher's role is to let students know when they are wrong so they do not to repeat the same mistakes in the future and these mistakes do not fossilize. Furthermore, constructive feedback encourages autonomy, helping them develop their language skills. In order to be effective –and not harmful, as Truscott said– a

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/fossilization>

teacher must be selective and not correct everything. Identifying which mistakes should be corrected and which ones should not remains vital for the effectiveness of correction. Here lies the importance of this paper because the study in Chapter 3 focuses on how to improve the effectiveness of CF depending on students' characteristics.

Once we have discussed different research on whether or not CF is useful for language learning, we turn to consider what errors should be corrected. EFL teachers usually wonder which errors should be corrected and which ones should not or if they should correct every single error students write. Freeman and Lewis (1998) considered that feedback might sometimes be not relevant for students, focusing on low level learning goals or being overwhelming in quantity or deficient in tone. Thus when providing feedback, the foreign language teacher should always be relevant and brief. Monaghan (2012) agrees that language teachers should limit to three or four major suggestions for improvement. Moreover, teachers should focus on specific grammatical aspects recently explained and studied in the curriculum so students' can consolidate their previous knowledge (Monaghan, 2012).

Corrective feedback can deal with treatable and untreatable errors (Ferris, 1999). On the one hand, a *treatable error* occurs in "rule-governed way". For instance, treatable mistakes include problems with verbs, subject-verb agreement, noun endings, articles, pronouns, and perhaps spelling. On the other hand, *untreatable errors* are idiosyncratic meaning that there is no grammar rules to help students understand how to correct them. Examples of untreatable errors are lexical errors, word choice and word order. Salazar and Martí (2010) found that treatable errors are easier to amend than untreatable ones. This is why one may assume that teachers' feedback should focus more on treatable errors. Consequently, these results are taken into account in the study in Chapter 3.

To conclude, we may argue that there is no categorical empirical study demonstrating the efficacy of written corrective feedback (Sheen, 2011). Although some scholars still argue that CF highly influencing foreign language acquisition remains controversial, recent studies have proved that corrective feedback is an important factor in foreign language acquisition (Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Sheen, 2007; Ellis et al., 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2010; Sheen, 2011).



### 1.3 Who should correct?

During the past years, new feedback techniques have been developed. Nowadays different figures can provide feedback in the classroom. There is the EFL teacher, students giving peer-evaluations, there is also computer-delivered feedback and even students can self-correct their own writings (Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Sheen, 2011). Although computer-delivered feedback, peer-reviews and self-assessments can be highly interesting, this study focuses on teacher's feedback for different reasons.

These reasons mainly focus on the teachers' role and what students expect from them. First, studies have demonstrated that feedback is an interactive part of the learning process because it helps creating a useful interpersonal relationship between the teacher and individual students (Hyland, 1998; Conrad and Goldstein, 1999; Hyland and Hyland, 2001). Second, students wish to be corrected by their teachers and considering students' wishes and needs are important to achieve a successful learning process (Leki, 1991; Ferris, 1995; Sheen, 2011). Third, and as a consequence of the second premise, many teachers feel they must write comments on students' papers in order to help them improve as writers and to justify the grade they have been given (Hyland, 2003).

Furthermore, Freeman and Lewis (1998) argued that a high percentage of the feedback teachers provide to students is not useful if it is delayed. If students hand in a piece of writing for the teacher to correct, it would be ideal that the teacher corrects it as soon as possible. Monaghan (2012) states that students may lose interest if teachers provide feedback after a week or two.

Students should be corrected constantly for a long period of time (Sheen, 2011). Studies looking beyond immediate corrections have proved that there is an improvement in students' language accuracy (Chandler, 2003; Hyland, 2003). Therefore, it can be said that feedback facilitates student's writing both in the short term and over time (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). However, longitudinal studies "rarely span more than one semester" (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 86).

After discussing whether errors should be corrected or not, who should correct and when should errors be amended, we turn to consider different types of corrective feedback in Chapter 2.

# Chapter 2: Types of written corrective feedback

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A foreign language teacher can make use of a wide range of techniques to let students know what they have done wrong. It can be argued that there are as many types as teachers since every professional has their own method (Sheen, 2011). However, written corrective feedback can be subdivided into three categories: proximate or holistic feedback, content critique or error correction and direct or indirect feedback. These techniques are not mutually exclusive.

## 2.1 Proximate versus holistic feedback

Feedback can also be classified as proximate or holistic (Monaghan, 2012). On the one hand, proximate feedback is characterised for being selective and analytic. It is normally written in the margins of the text. On the other hand, holistic feedback is more comprehensive and it is usually written at the top or bottom of the page. This type of feedback normally gives advice to students' in order to improve their work as a whole.

Students with higher proficiency are more able to locate their errors, find a solution and self-correct than learners with a beginning or intermediate level (Hendrickson, 1980). Accordingly, the educational coordinator in Àgora Lledó stated that pedagogical guidelines given by the school indicate that students in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education should be given proximate feedback while advanced students should be given proximate, but also holistic feedback. Examples of both techniques are illustrated below.

### Example 1: proximate feedback (extracted from our data)

went  
(revise  
past  
tenses)

Last summer, I ~~goed~~ to Los Angeles to stay with my cousin for few a weeks. One afternoon we had lunch in a nice restaurant in the centre of town when my cousin got a call on her mobile phone and went outside to talk. While she ~~spoke~~ to her friend, I suddenly noticed a man who was ~~siting~~ next to us. It was the actor Johnny Depp!

was speaking!  
present  
continuous!

sitting: revise spelling!

### Example 2: holistic feedback (extracted from our data)

Last summer, I go to Los Angeles to stay with my cousin for few a weeks. One afternoon we have lunch in a nice restaurant in the centre of town when my cousin got a call on her mobile phone and went outside to talk. While she spoke to her friend, I suddenly noticed a man who sat next to us. It was the actor Johnny Depp!

You need to revise past tenses  
(past simple and past continuous)  
and when to use them!

## 2.2 Error correction versus content critique

A foreign language teacher can give feedback more focused on error correction and another one with emphasis on content (Monaghan, 2012). The former type helps students to know what to write. In fact, this approach focuses on spelling and grammar. Error correction can be either direct or indirect, as described in section 2.3.

Content critique focuses on what to write, understood as the logical development of ideas, as well as writing a coherent, cohesive and adequate text (Monaghan, 2012). Nation (2009) agrees that mature students such as teenagers, young adults and adults are expected to have a complex content when writing due to their cognitive development. Consequently, foreign language teachers should provide CF on the aforementioned linguistic features to these types of learners. Examples of the aforementioned techniques are provided below.

### Example 3: error correction

Last summer, I ~~goed~~<sup>went</sup> to Los Angeles to stay with my cousin for few weeks. One afternoon we had lunch in a nice restaurant in the centre of town when my cousin got a call on her mobile~~phone~~<sup>S</sup> and went outside to talk. While she ~~spoke~~<sup>was speaking</sup> to her friend, I suddenly noticed a man who was ~~siting~~<sup>SP</sup> next to us. It was the actor Johnny Depp!

M: missing word  
S: split word  
SP: spelling

### Example 4: content critique

Last summer, I went to Los Angeles to stay with my cousin for a few weeks, one afternoon we had lunch in a nice restaurant in the centre of town when my cousin got a call on her mobile phone and went outside to talk and while she was speaking to her friend, I suddenly noticed a man in a black hat who was sitting next to us. It was the actor Johnny Depp!

Good paragraph with unexpected ending!  
Very coherent ideas but shorter sentences next time!

## 2.3 Direct versus indirect feedback

A foreign language teacher can either correct directly all the mistakes (direct feedback) or make students look for the correct answers (indirect feedback). Obviously, the first way is faster, but students may easily forget the corrections and recommendations or they may not pay attention to what the teacher has written (Mattisson, 2014). In fact, it is argued that indirect feedback “requires learners to attend to their errors through engaging them in problem-solving activities” (Ferris, 2004: 60).

By making language students look for the correct answer by providing them some hints, they should be able to find the correct forms of their own mistakes. It has to be taken into account that indirect feedback should be used when students have a certain level in their L2. Logically, the more proficient students are, the



easier it will be for them to self-correct. Furthermore, using a correction code implies a high level of commitment from both the teacher and students and, therefore, more suitable for high-motivated students (Sheen, 2011).

Some studies have shown that direct written corrective feedback is more beneficial than indirect one (Sheen, 2007; Ellis et al., 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2010). These scholars defend that students gain more language accuracy when direct feedback is provided. However, the three studies were focused on the same topic: English articles. This evidence is not enough to state that direct feedback is more recommendable than indirect one. Preferences about direct or indirect feedback may vary depending on different factors such as students' beliefs, motivations and even culture (Sheen, 2011). Therefore, there are no conclusive findings about which type of student would benefit more from one type or the other.

Regarding indirect corrective feedback, and in order to give students hints of errors they have written, Hyland and Hyland (2006) provide a complete table with abbreviations to indicate students the type of mistakes they have made. For instance, there is word choice (WC), verb tense (VT), singular or plural (S/P), punctuation (PU), informal (INF) or subject-verb agreement (SV).

The British Council also has its own writing correction code, available at their official website.<sup>3</sup>

Writing correction code		
Code	Use	Example
WW	Wrong word	<i>As our plane flew <u>on</u> the mountains we saw snow.</i>
WT	Wrong time	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains we <u>see</u> snow.</i>
WF	Wrong form	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains we <u>was seeing</u> snow.</i>
WO	Wrong order	<i>As our plane over the mountain <u>flew</u> we saw snow.</i>
SP	Spelling	<i>As our plane <u>flue</u> over the mountains we saw snow.</i>
P	Punctuation	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains; we saw snow.</i>
X	Extra word	<i>As our plane flew over <u>to</u> the mountains we saw snow.</i>
M	Missing word	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains _ saw snow.</i>
R	Register	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains we <u>observed</u> snow.</i>
?	Not clear	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains we saw snow.</i>
!	Silly mistake!	<i>As our plane flew over the mountains we <u>seed</u> snow.</i>
RW	Try re-writing	<i><u>Our vehicle flies, we snow find, over mountains you saw it.</u></i>

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/code.pdf>

Figure 1: Writing correction code (The British Council, 2007)

It has to be taken into account that correction codes can be adapted to different levels and every teacher can use the one that works best in a specific classroom. An example of correction code is illustrated below.

Code	Meaning	Example
😊	Well-written section: apt and clear	The French Revolution started in 1789.
<b>V</b>	Vocabulary: find a different word for this	The revelation started in 1789.
<b>T</b>	Correct the tense	The French Revolution has started in 1789.
<b>WO</b>	Change the word order	The French Revolution in 1789 started.
<b>WP</b>	Wrong phrase	The French Revolution of France.
<b>Sp</b>	Try spelling this again	The revaluation started in 1789.
<b>P</b>	Correct the punctuation	The French Revolution started in 1789
<b>S</b>	Style is a problem	The French Revolution kicked off in 1789.
<b>^</b>	Put in the missing word	The Revolution started in 1789.
<b>X</b>	There is an extra word	The French Revolution started in the 1789.
<b>?</b>	Meaning is unclear	The Revolution which started was 1789.
<b>/</b>	Split the word or sentence up	The Frenchrevolution started in 1789.

Figure 2: Correction code available in *CLIL Activities: A resource for subject and language teachers* (Dale and Tanners, 2012)

Another possibility is to use symbols instead of abbreviations, here is an example by the University of Delaware (USA) in 2013.

Guide to Editing Symbols	
Verb error	△
Wrong word	⊘
Agreement error	□
Spelling error	~~~~~
Word(s) missing	⊙
Need new paragraph	¶
No new paragraph	No ¶
Incorrect word order	~
Don't translate word-for-word	{ }
Omit	[ ]
Accent needed	↙
Incomprehensible	??
Very nice	+
Other symbols:	

Figure 3: University of Delaware's (2013) correction symbols

Apart from illustrating different correction codes, it is interesting to show practical examples of these two techniques, as Examples 5 and 6 depict.

#### Example 5: direct feedback

Last summer, I <sup>went</sup> ~~goed~~ to Los Angeles to stay with my cousin for few a weeks. One afternoon we had lunch in a nice restaurant in the centre of town when my cousin got a call on her <sup>mobile phone</sup> ~~mobilephone~~ and went outside to talk. While she <sup>was speaking</sup> ~~spoke~~ to her friend, I suddenly noticed a man who was <sup>sitting</sup> ~~siting~~ next to us. It was the actor Johnny Depp!

#### Example 6: indirect feedback

Last summer, I <sup>!</sup> ~~goed~~ to Los Angeles to stay with my cousin for few a weeks. One afternoon we had lunch in a nice restaurant in the centre of town when my cousin got a call on her <sup>S</sup> ~~mobile~~phone and went outside to talk. While she <sup>WT</sup> ~~spoke~~ to her friend, I suddenly noticed a man who was <sup>SP</sup> ~~siting~~ next to us. It was the actor Johnny Depp!

In this second chapter we have addressed the issue of types of feedback along with different types of correction codes a FL teacher can make use of in the classroom. We turn now to Chapter 3, the study itself.

# Chapter 3: The Study

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Learners' individual factors are considered of high importance when providing effective CF (Sheen, 2011; Pawlaw, 2012). Hence, the aim of this study is to analyse whether learners' individual factors are taken into consideration when providing written CF in the EFL classroom. The factors analysed in this study are students' age, proficiency and interest in the subject.

This chapter describes the study carried out. In the first place, the research questions and the hypotheses are explained in section 3.1. Secondly, there is a contextualisation of the educational centre and the two class groups taking part in the study. Thirdly, the subsequent data collection procedure is described and, finally, there is an analysis and discussion of the results.

## 3.1 Research questions

This paper aims to examine if students' individual factors are taken into account when providing written CF in the EFL classroom. This comparative study takes into account three factors: a) age; b) level in foreign language; and c) interest in the subject. Consequently, the research questions of this study are:

- **Research Question 1:**

**Is written CF different depending on students' age?**

The first factor is students' age. There are significant cognitive differences between children and adults regarding foreign language acquisition (Nation, 2009; Pawlaw, 2012). One can therefore assume that age is a factor to be taken into account when providing feedback. As seen in Chapter 2, the teacher is expected to provide direct and proximate feedback to children, focused on treatable errors. With older students, the teacher is expected to provide error correction but also content critique and correct both treatable and untreatable errors.



- **Research Question 2:**

- Is written CF different depending on students' level?**

The second factor, students' proficiency in their foreign language, has been proved as an important factor to ensure the efficacy of written CF. Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) found out that the effectiveness of CF is highly influenced by students' language proficiency.

Theoretically, advanced students should be more able to locate their errors, find a solution and self-correct than learners with a beginning or intermediate level (Hendrickson, 1980). This is why a correction code could be used with advanced students. Havranek and Cesnik (2001) stated that students with higher language ability are more likely to benefit from CF than others. Perhaps foreign language teachers should focus on three main grammar rules with students with lower proficiency instead of over-correcting and overwhelming students.

- **Research Question 3:**

- Is written CF different depending on students' interest in the subject?**

The third characteristic is an affective factor: students' interest and motivation in the subject. It has been proven that students' motivation and attitude play a role in whether learners can benefit from CF (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010; Sheen, 2011). To our knowledge, there have been few studies on this matter so the present study is exploratory in this respect.

## 3.2 Hypotheses

Taking into account the aforementioned literature on CF, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- Research Question 1: Written CF will be different depending on students' age due to the cognitive differences in foreign language acquisition (Nation, 2009).
- Research Question 2: Written CF will be different depending on students' proficiency. It will not only vary from class to class but the teacher will take into account individual differences (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010).
- Research Question 3: Written CF will depend on students' interest in the subject to encourage students who have high motivation and to not over-correct students with a lower interest in the subject (Sheen, 2011).

## 3.3 Method

### 3.3.1 Contextualisation of the centre

The study has been carried out at Àgora Lledó International School, an educational centre located in Castellón (Spain). This institution opened its doors for the first time in September 2001. Later on, in December 2006, it joined the educational group named New Agora Education Institution. It is a centre with modern sports, ICT and musical facilities, as well as laboratories for Science and Biology subjects. This centre hosts students from different countries. The majority of students are Spanish, but there also are students from Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, Italy, Lebanon, Venezuela and the United States. It can be said that students live in an intercultural context.

This study has been carried out in this centre for different reasons. First, New Agora Education Institution is the organisation in charge of writing the educational programme and it includes the latest pedagogical methodologies. For instance, the school follows most of the recommendations about writing and CF given by scholars (Hyland, 2003; Nation, 2009). Second, we had access to writings from the beginning to the academic year to June, the end of the year. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it is highly interesting to analyse how CF is giving during an extended period of time.

### 3.3.2 Participants

This comparative study focuses on two class groups: one class is studying 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education and the other one is in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of national Baccalaureate. The details about the aforementioned individual characteristics are described below.

The first group taking part in this study is a 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education. It is composed of a total of 18 students, 6 male students and 12 female students. All of them have a Spanish origin with the exception of one boy with Chinese background. However, this student has been raised in Spain and he has been attending this school since age 3. All the students in this class

are or will be 13 during this academic year.

Regarding the language level, this is a homogenous group regarding English level. At the beginning of the academic year students are placed in different groups depending on their level and a test was given to students in order to verify the level of the students. The result indicated that the majority of students, around 90%, have an elementary level in their L2, equivalent to A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Besides, there are two students with learning disabilities who need special attention during lessons.

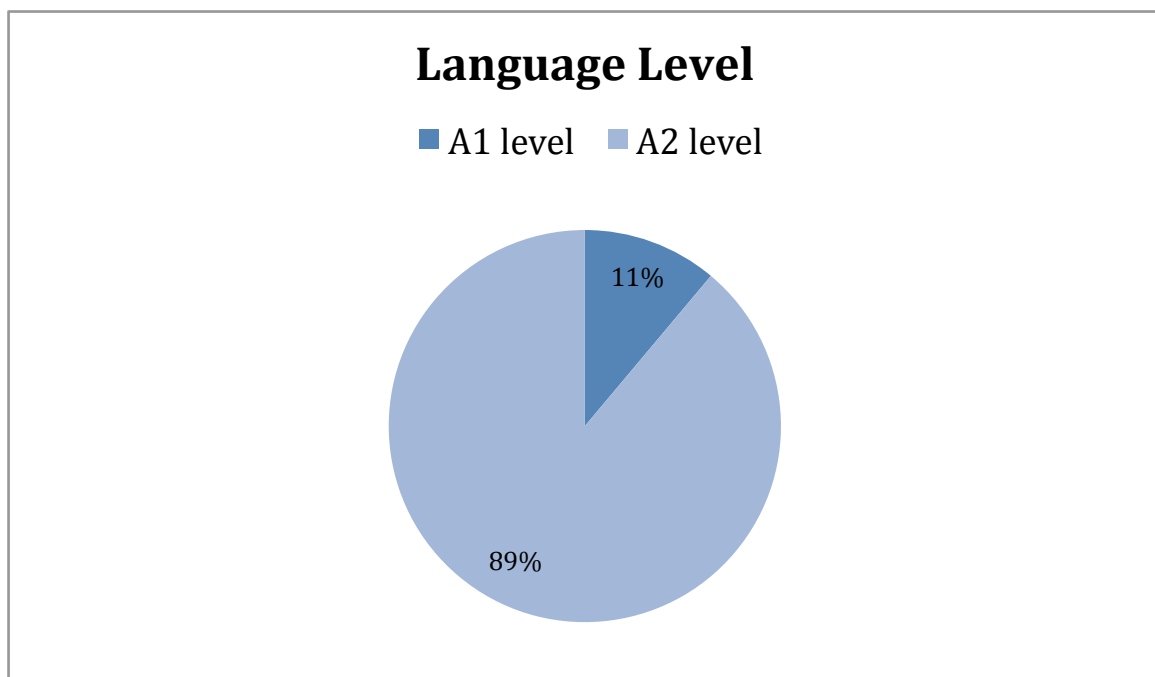


Figure 4: Level of students in the first group

As far as interest in the subject is concerned, a questionnaire was handed in so as to examine students' interest in L2. They had to indicate their level of interest in the English subject, choosing among "low interest", "medium interest" or "high interest". None of them considered having a low interest in English, 33% had a medium level of interest and 67% was highly interested in English.

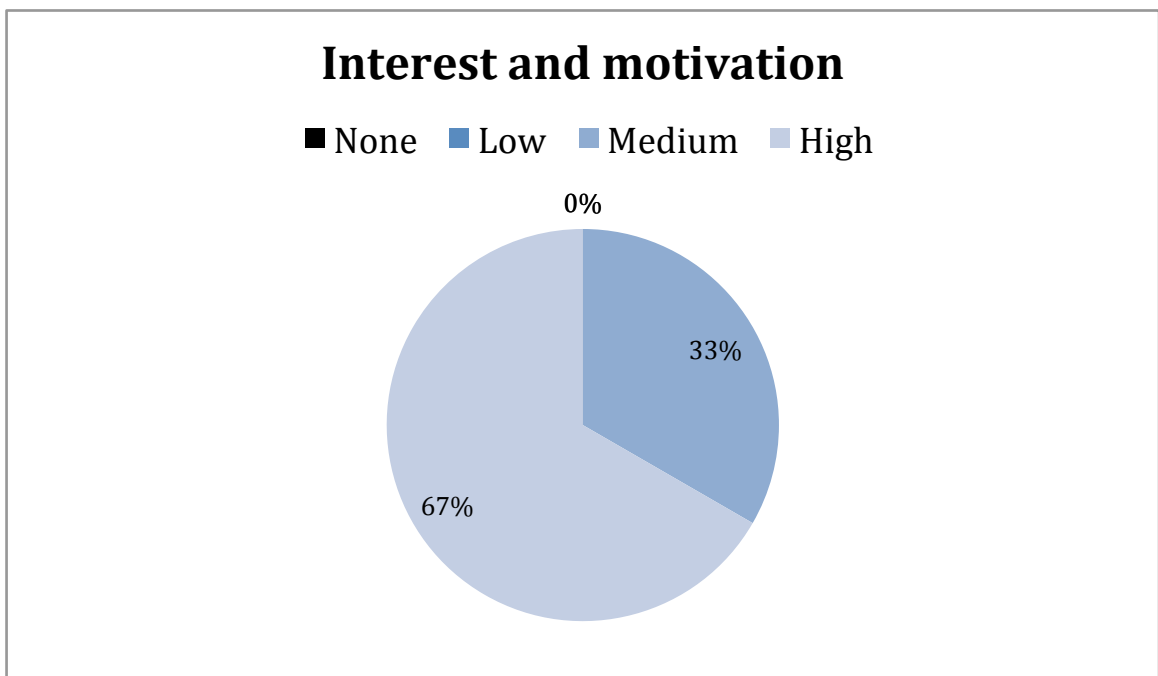


Figure 5: Interest of students in the subject in the first group

The second group in this study is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year of national Baccaureate. This class is made up of 15 students, 8 male students and 7 female students. Most of them are Spanish, but there is one student from Venezuela who started studying in this centre four years ago. Most of the students are 17 or 18 years old with the exception of one student, aged 19.

To establish students' level in their foreign language, students sat a test at the beginning of the study to establish their English level. Sixty-seven percent of the class has an upper-intermediate level (B2) and 13% of them have an advanced level (C1), according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Nevertheless, 20% of students have a lower level (B1). It is worth mentioning that there are three students (two boys and one girl) who have started studying at the centre during the Baccaureate period and their proficiency in English is lower than the rest of their classmates. In this group there are no students with learning disabilities.

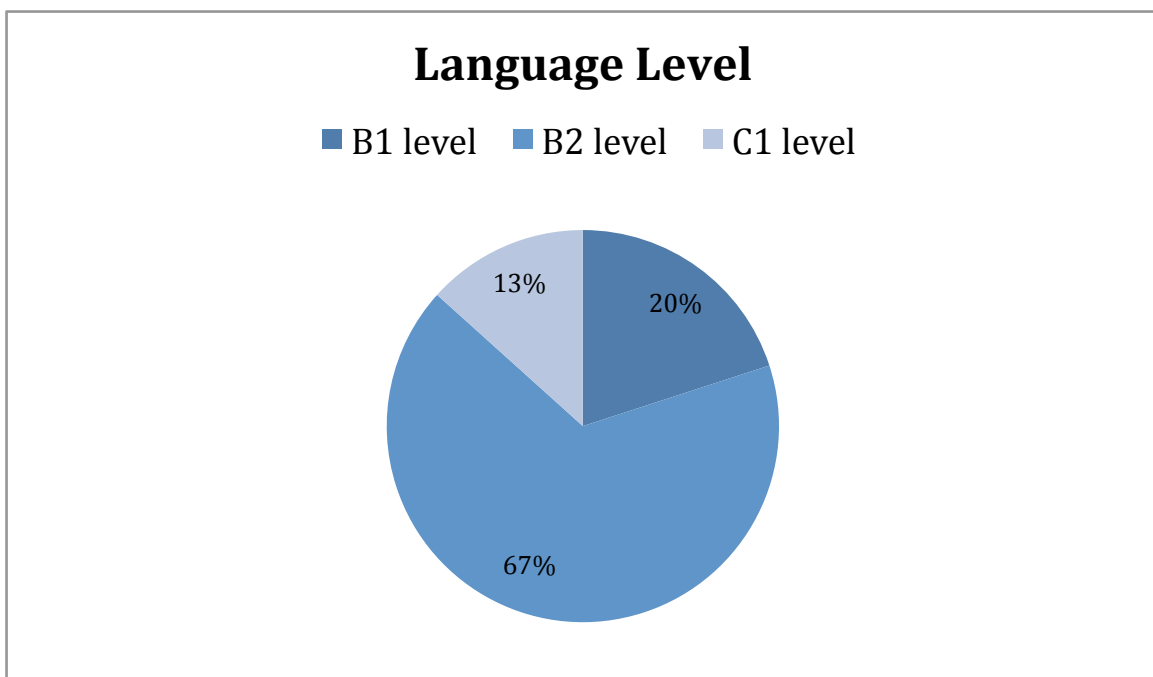


Figure 6: Level of students in the second group

As for the students' interest in the subject, they had to fill in a questionnaire to establish their level of interest in this subject. They had to indicate how much they are into English as a subject, choosing among "low interest", "medium interest" or "high interest". Twenty-seven percent had a low interest in English, 20% had a medium level of interest and 53% was highly interested.

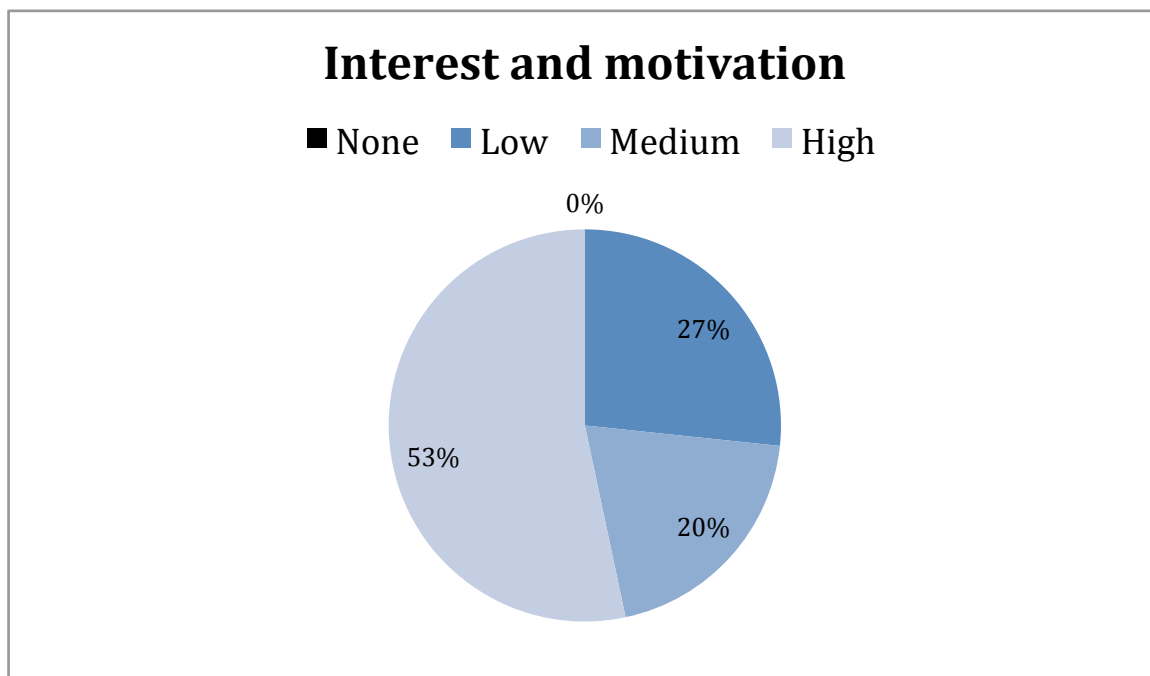


Figure 7: Interest of students in the subject in the second group

Furthermore, we consider necessary to succinctly describe the teacher taking part in this study. We will refer to her as Miss C, a Spanish teacher in her 40s, with more than 20 years of experience teaching English as a foreign language. She teaches 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education and she is in charge of 2<sup>nd</sup> year of national Baccalaureate as well.

### 3.3.3 Data collection procedure

This study has compiled writings from both groups with written CF given by foreign language teachers. The writings have been collected from the beginning of the academic year to the end (9 months).

It is worthwhile mentioning that it is the English teacher who provides feedback to students and peer-feedback is hardly ever implemented. This is a rule of the centre and, therefore, teachers have little to say on this issue. Regarding when to provide it, the English teacher agrees on this study's argument that immediate feedback is recommendable. Students tend to lose interest when it takes more than two days to give them back their writings. According to Miss C, interest is crucial in the teaching-learning process.

Foreign language teachers in Ágora Lledó usually ask students from the 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education to write a piece of writing at the end of each unit. There are 9 units and therefore students are asked to write at least 9 pieces of writing during the academic year. This year they are using the textbook *Solutions Elementary Student's Book* (Oxford University Press). It makes use of up-to-date topics. Regarding writing skills, there are two writings in each unit. There is a short one at the beginning of the unit and, in the last section of each unit there is a genre and an explanation to better understand the uses and common structures of such genre. For example, students have to write a formal letter, an informal e-mail, a film review, an advertisement, a story and a description.

Students in the second group are preparing for the Spanish university entrance exams. This is why they exclusively write essays about recurrent topics in this exam. This includes topics such as social relations, environmental problems, the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies, among others. These popular topics are studied in every of the ten chapters in their textbook, *Over to you 2* (Oxford University Press). The teacher's methodology consists of asking students to write an essay on the unit's topic and two extra ones. Hence, students are asked to write at least three essays per month and a minimum of 25 essays during the year.



The data for the present study consisted of 198 writings. On the one hand, there are 73 compositions written by students in 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education. These writings include genres such as physical and psychological description of a person, an invitation to a social event, an informal letter, an email and an advertisement. On the other hand, a total of 125 writings written by students in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of national Baccalaureate are included in the study. In addition, two different interviews were carried out with the FL teacher in the study from April to May.

### 3.4 Results and discussion

In order to establish whether learners' individual differences are taken into consideration or not, 198 pieces of writing have been examined. We have analysed what techniques the FL teacher usually uses in each group. As explained in Chapter 2, different types of feedback are not mutually exclusive and can be combined.

The bars represent the usage rate of each type of feedback. For instance, direct feedback is used in 100% of cases in both groups while indirect feedback is only used in 2% of cases (a total of 5 writings) in the first group and 20% of cases (a total of 23 writings) in the second group. The results drawn from the study are illustrated below.

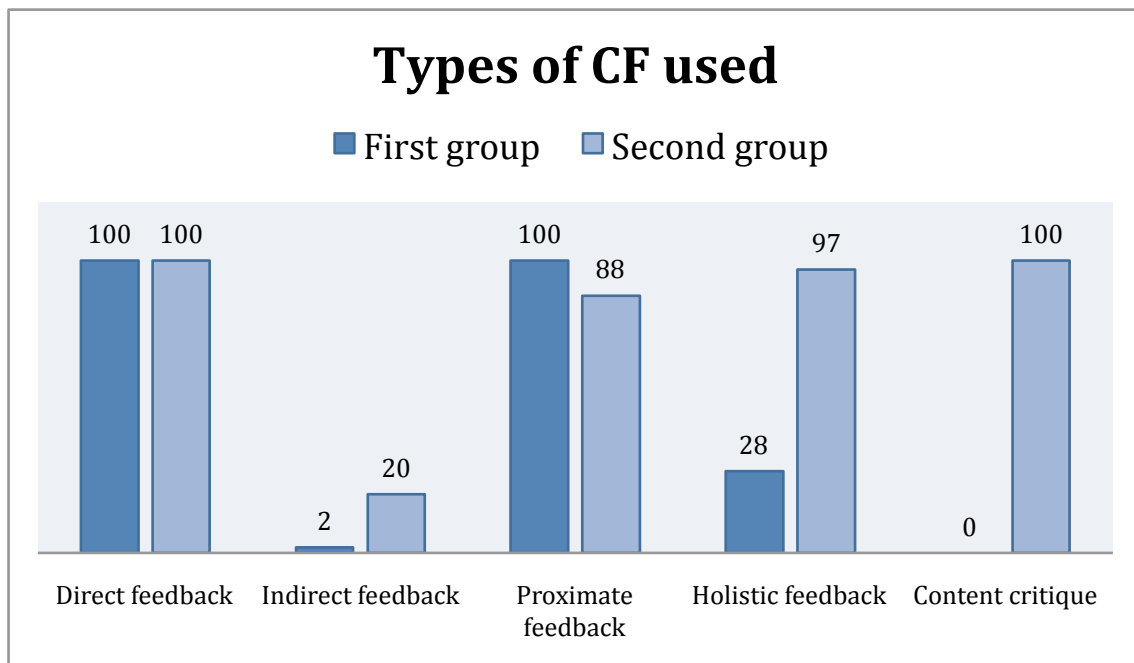


Figure 8: Types of corrective feedback per group

- **Research Question 1: Is CF different depending on students' age?**

The teacher takes into consideration students' age and group class when providing feedback (see Figure 8). With younger students, direct and proximate feedback is provided. On the other hand, Miss C also provides direct and

proximate feedback, but also content critique and holistic feedback. Therefore, she provides a direct form of feedback to students in group one, but she prefers giving comprehensive feedback to more mature students for them to improve their language skills, but also the format and content of their essays.

As shown in Figure 8, Miss C changes the way to provide feedback depending on the class group. On the one hand, she provides direct and proximate feedback to the first group (first year of Compulsory Education). She sometimes makes use of holistic feedback with brief comments such as “good job!” or “you need to revise the past simple tense”. As explained in section 2.1 *Proximate versus Holistic feedback*, she prefers error correction to content critique since the centre guidelines encourages teachers to focus on form rather than content during this educational stage. Furthermore, she has never used a correction code or another indirect feedback method in this stage since in her opinion “students are not cognitively ready to do so”.

On the other hand, Miss C usually gives comprehensive CF to students in the second group. During an interview, Miss C stated that she takes three factors into account: format, content and language because in the Spanish university entrance exam, not only are language skills evaluated but also the format of the essays and, specially, students’ ability to defend their arguments. She provides direct feedback combined with proximate and holistic feedback. Generally, grammatical and lexical mistakes are corrected in the margins of the text and a comprehensive comment on content and format is usually written at the bottom of the page. It is worth mentioning that the main difference between both groups is that Miss C always provides content critique to students in the second group while she does not use this technique with the first group in any case.

We can draw different conclusions from the results presented in the above bar chart. First, the FL teacher considers age as a distinguishing factor. Although Miss C usually gives direct and proximate CF to both groups, she does not give holistic feedback or content critique to the first one. To the second group, she provides comprehensive CF combining four different feedback techniques. Therefore, we may claim that CF is different depending on students’ age.

- **Research Question 2: Is CF different depending on students' proficiency?**

When giving CF, Miss C does not take into account particular differences among students. In 1<sup>st</sup> year of Secondary Compulsory Education, Miss C does not take students' proficiency into account since the level is to some extent homogenous and the vast majority of students have an A2 level (see Figure 6). In 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Baccalaureate, Miss C stated in an interview that she tries not to overload with corrections the writings of students who have a lower level (B1) and who have recently incorporated to the centre. Nevertheless, she usually provides the same CF to these students and students with a B2 and a C1 level.

Second, another conclusion drawn by the results is that language proficiency is not considered a distinguishing factor. Even though the first group is homogeneous regarding language proficiency (see Figure 4), there are considerable differences among students in the second group (see Figure 6), which are not taken into account. Miss C does not make use of different CF techniques with the latter. She does not use any correction code for students' with a higher proficiency, as suggested by Mattisson (2014) or provides holistic feedback to students with lower proficiency, which could be less overwhelming than proximate feedback. The techniques used to provide feedback are the same without taking into consideration students' proficiency.

- **Research Question 3: Is CF different depending on students' interest in the subject?**

Although Miss C argued in both interviews that she takes interest and motivation into account, she does not ask students about this. In fact, after handing in the questionnaire in the second group there were surprises about students with lower level having a high interest in the subject or shy students who never participate in class but like the subject anyway.

Thus, learners' interest and motivation play no role in this teacher's CF. However, as stated by Sheen (2011) and Pawlaw (2012) this factor is highly relevant when learning a language and it should definitely be taken into account. Maybe students with a high interest in the subject could make use of a correction

code to improve their language skills. Perhaps, students with lower interest should not be overloaded with proximate feedback and multiple comments but only a holistic comment.

Third, Miss C does not consider interest and motivation when correcting. Although she underlined the importance of students' interest and motivation in one of the interviews, she does not actually ask students about their interest in the subject, at least not directly. In her opinion, good grades and participation in class show to what extent a student is interested. Nevertheless, this is not an empirical methodology and contradictory results were found in the questionnaire handed in to students (see Figure 5 and Figure 7).

In the second group, there are 8 students with high interest in English, 3 students with medium-level of interest and 4 students with a low interest in the subject. Interestingly, Student 1 has a higher level (C1) and good grades, but he indicated in the questionnaire that he has a low interest in the subject since he "gets usually bored in class". Contrarily, Student 2 has a lower proficiency (B1) since he has recently incorporated to the centre. Although he has an average grade of 6 out of 10 in the subject, he wrote in the questionnaire that he has a "high interest in the subject because it can be useful to get a good job" and "I like travelling and talking to the people from the country". Thus, interest and motivation cannot be taken for granted.

Overall Miss C's methodology is adequate according to Sheen's criteria (2011), but some students with low proficiency and interest may feel overwhelmed meanwhile other students with higher proficiency or interest would like more recommendations, according to personal interviews carried out from April to May. However, the results from these interviews are not conclusive since not all students could be interviewed.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

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The present study aimed to investigate if FL teachers take into account learners' individual factors when providing written corrective feedback. Ágora Lledó, the educational centre chosen for this study, implements innovative pedagogical tendencies. This is why the hypotheses formulated in this study suggested that FL teachers in this centre would provide "high-quality" feedback, meaning that they consider age, language proficiency and interest as important factors when correcting. In order to verify these hypotheses, a comparative study with two groups and the CF provided during the academic year (9 months) was carried out.

Wide differences between groups were found when it came to the variable of age. The CF provided to the first group is direct and proximate while more comprehensive feedback is preferred for the second group. This group is usually given feedback that combines techniques such as direct, proximate and holistic feedback with content critique. It is interesting to observe that language proficiency and motivation are not taken into account when providing CF, even though scholars encourage to do so (Sheen, 2011; Pawlaw, 2012). This could be a missed opportunity for students with a higher level to improve both their language skills but also the format and content of their essays.

Another conclusion drawn from this paper is that there is no categorical answer about which the most effective way to provide written CF to foreign language students is since every learner has its own individual characteristics influencing the effectiveness of corrective feedback (Sheen, 2011). Nevertheless, FL teachers should take into account the main features of their students such as the aforementioned ones to ensure a good teaching-learning process. Moreover, if teachers know how to maximise the benefits of feedback, they could save time when correcting and their CF would be more helpful to students.

One of the main ideas from this study is that FL teachers should reconsider the way they provide feedback to their students. If possible, they should try

different types of feedback in order to properly decide which type of feedback is more useful in the classroom (Mattisson, 2014). Perhaps, if students could express their preferences about corrective feedback, this could help improve the quality of feedback. In this study, it has been argued that providing relevant and constructive feedback is necessary when learning a language because it ensures a correct teaching-learning process. This is why both teachers and students should give it more importance than they currently do.

Furthermore, after the study, we argue that the written CF provided to the first group is adequate since it is a homogeneous group: students have the same age, their language proficiency is similar and their interest overall is medium-high. There are no students with low interest in the subject. This is why a combination of direct and proximate feedback is suitable for this group.

Contrarily, the second group is more complex than the first one. Students in this group are the same age, but students' language level and their interest and motivation notably varies. As seen in section 3.3.2 *Participants*, there are different levels within the same class: 3 students have a B1 level; 10 of them have a B2 level and only 2 students have a C1 level. Furthermore, interest and motivation also varies since there are 8 students with high interest in English, 3 students with medium-level of interest and 4 students with a low interest in the subject (see Figure 13).

Due to the heterogeneity of this group, the teacher should try to adapt to students' individual factors. Miss C could try to provide indirect feedback to students with higher proficiency and interest and use holistic comments with students with a lower interest in order not to overwhelm them. The aim of using different types of techniques is for students to maximise the benefits of feedback. However, if this was considered overoptimistic, Miss C could try to implement different types of feedback in the class and see which techniques are more useful for students to improve their language skills.

It is worth mentioning that the present study is subject to a number of limitations. First, we should mention that a small sample of writings have been analysed. The amount of writings could have been higher but we had access only to 198 writings from both groups. Second, the main characteristics of the centre make it unique in the area and therefore the conclusions drawn from this study

might not be applicable to other educational centres. This is why the results from this study cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. Thirdly, questionnaires on students' preferences are rather subjective and open to change with time. This is a drawback from qualitative data; however, this type of data provides very rich insights.

As we have seen from previous studies, research has been undertaken about students' individual factors and the subsequent implications for written corrective feedback (Sheen, 2011; Pawlaw, 2012). It could be interesting for future research to investigate other students' individual characteristics and their role in foreign language acquisition. Besides, students' preferences about CF could be examined in future research since we believe they may have an impact on learning.



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## Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview with the FL teacher

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- Do you agree that FL teachers should provide corrective feedback?
- According to your personal experience, do you consider CF to be useful in the foreign language learning?
- When do you usually give back your written corrective feedback?
- What criteria have you got when correcting?
- Do you take into account students' age when providing CF?
- Do you take into consideration other individual factors such as proficiency or interest in the subject?
- Have you ever tried a correction code with more mature students?