Error Correction in the Early Stages of Second Language Learning

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Abstract
Some studies suggest that teacher feedback on ESL/EFL students' writing is not all the time effective (Hendrickson, 1980; Semke, 1984; Robb et. al, 1986; Truscott, 1996). Ka Ping (2004) examined the factors that affect the effectiveness of teacher feedback by analyzing students' preferences for teacher feedback in their writing. Red marked corrections by teachers are often discarded by the learners and the same mistakes are most likely to be made the next time they sit for a composition. The checklist comes here as a solution to help students self-edit their errors in their writing in order to produce a final draft. The present research supports what is seen as an efficient way of making the corrections, i.e. providing learners with error checklists for their first draft for purposes of re-writing that draft and giving a final draft to be corrected by the teacher. In this sense, the learner would be self-assessing him/herself. Two groups of 25 students participated in the study. The checklist was administered to one group of students for one semester. The experimental group performed better in the final exam test. I conclude that the use of the checklist is very beneficial in the noticing and avoidance of errors in writing.
Keywords: Feedback, Corrective Feedback, Error Correction, Checklist, Writing

Identification of the Research Problem
Statement of the Research Problem
The purpose of this study is to determine whether direct/explicit error correction/feedback in the foreign/second language mixed classroom in an Omani college of education is beneficial to the learner or not.

Background and/or Context to the Research Problem
Contemporary theories of second language acquisition and learning (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Krashen, 1981, 1982) as well as of their implementation in the foreign/second language classroom, have brought some outstanding explanations and proposals that investigate the general processes of language learning. Considering that I have good command of more than

three languages one of which is my native Tunisian Arabic – which is in a situation of diglossia with Standard Arabic -- I couldn't but introspect myself as a foreign/second language learner in identifying with some of these processes. Sometimes, I come to think that if I had such knowledge of the processes involved therein, maybe I could have had not only a better but a faster command of the languages I learned at school. This led me to think of the usefulness of the theoretical side of the learning operation to the early learner; in other words, could my students achieve better results if I made that knowledge available for them? So how to put theoretical ideas into practice? And, ultimately, how important would the gender factor be in a mixed classroom in a culture of students who seem to be so sensitive to what they don't hesitate to term 'humiliation' and usually report to head of departments, deans, and the Ministry of Higher Education sometimes?

In my teaching experience, I have always had a special interest in learners' errors: Why do all native speakers of Arabic learning English as a foreign/second language make the same types of errors in spelling, capitalization, grammar, etc., in their first stages of learning? The body of literature in the field of error analysis, correcting feedback and students' attitude to feedback (Ellis, 2005; Ellis et al., 2006; Leeman 2003; Mackey & Philip, 1998; Mackey et al., 2000) helped me in some way to see the systematic nature of errors, like the transfer from L1 to L2 hypothesis advanced by Kaplan (1966) and errors that can find their explanation in the L2 system itself. My present interest goes to errors that can be detected during the writing process because it seems that, as feedback comes later after the test and that it comes also with a more vital factor for students, i.e. the mark, errors in writing are not allowed the necessary opportunity to be fixed immediately and corrections mentioned can be of little help for students who will just discard them if ever they read them. As a learner of English, I found it very difficult at first to figure out the way of writing in a correct way in English — the Roman alphabet is so different from the Arabic one. The two languages, belonging to two different language families, are so different when it comes to the linguistic system as such, for example what is a sentence in Arabic might look like a phrase in English on the surface. On the other hand, errors at the first stages of learning seem to be recurrent. Not correcting them would lead to fossilization (Ellis, 1991) in a behaviorist habit formation sense. Many researchers took the stand which says that errors should not be corrected at the first stages of learning (Krashen, 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). This claim was even reinforced by the supporters of content-based instruction who encourage the instruction of content rather than form. I think that the calling for not correcting errors at early stages is a claim that can be defended as far as spoken language is concerned, that is, the student should not be stopped while speaking for errors of grammar, for example. However, as far as writing is concerned, I think that students' errors should be corrected. Obviously, teachers may think that it is best to focus on content rather than form in a student's writing (Bates, 1993; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Then, what if errors impede the understanding of the text? Just look at how often a teacher comes across a student production where he/she can hardly get any meaning because of spelling, grammar, punctuation errors, etc.

Working on the correction of errors of form in the writing output using the checklist approach is preferred here because red marking and recasts, which can take the form of paraphrases on the student's paper can be easily interpreted as possible paraphrases rather than corrections (Carpenter et al., 2006). It is clear that at a psychological level the overt correction of errors by the teacher at the first stages of learning may be interpreted by the

student as a reprimand and thus lead him/her to a noninvolvement decision. It may de-motivate him/her and make him/her lose interest in the study the language. One possible solution is for learners to be given the chance to correct their errors by themselves. The answer to the how question here would be by asking students to write a paragraph on a given subject. The teacher should then prepare a checklist of the possible errors of a beginner-level learner depending on the focus of the program. The learner would be asked to leave that draft for one day or two and then check his/her writing with the aid of the checklist then re-write the paragraph after correcting the errors. The final draft would be given to the teacher along with the first draft so that the teacher can evaluate what progress was made by the learner and what errors he/she could not correct. The teacher will then focus, in the classroom, on the fields of errors students could not correct by themselves (South, 1998).

Statement of the Research Hypothesis
Students that have been engaged in the use of the checklist of errors, thus practicing in self-assessment, perform better in final exams of writing than those who have not been exposed to the self-assessment process.

Literature Review
Error correction is a problem faced by every ESL/EFL teacher in any subject of study. It is so problematic that all concerned teachers, might have found themselves, at a certain point in their teaching career, confronted with a decision to make as whether or not to overtly correct their students' errors in writing. Red marked corrections by teachers are often discarded by the learners and the same mistakes are most likely to be made the next time they sit for a composition. Connor (1997) argued that correcting errors in the students' writing often discourages further revision. He suggests that teachers should leave correcting for later drafts and show their students how to edit their writing in order to produce a final draft. Obviously, the present research will attempt to support what is seen as an efficient way of making the corrections, i.e. providing learners with error checklists for their first draft for purposes of re-writing that draft and giving a final draft to be corrected by the teacher. In this sense, the learner would be self-assessing him/herself.

It is generally believed that providing students with feedback on the writing sheet helps them correct their own mistakes/errors. However, some studies on teacher feedback on ESL/EFL students' writing shows that teacher feedback is not all the time effective (Hendrickson, 1980; Semke, 1984; Robb et al., 1986; Truscott, 1996). Ka Ping (2004) examined the factors that affect the effectiveness of teacher feedback by analyzing students' preferences for teacher feedback in their writing. The checklist solution assigns a facilitator role to the teacher in the error correction process. He would not correct the learners directly but would lead them to do it themselves using a checklist of possible and systematic errors.

Teachers have different ways of evaluating the purpose of a course. Evaluation is conditioned by the purpose of writing course and by the type of the 'writing teachers' (Leki, 1990). Leki (1990) classified writing teachers as three personas: teacher as real reader, teacher as coach, and teacher as evaluator. The teachers should decide which role to play in any task. Obviously, first drafts require a different approach from later drafts. The focus of this research is on the errors linked to the linguistic form (Long, 1991). A piece of research has been inconclusive about the fact that the L2 writing needs to "be error free or merely free of

global errors that impede understanding" (Leki, 1990, p. 58). Of course, it depends on the purpose of that specific writing activity. For instance, a letter of application needs to be error-free and in a composition describing a little girl errors that impede understanding should be penalized. South (1998) argues that:

> [Based on] 15 years of experience in the English-speaking business world, I can say that sloppy or poorly-worded correspondence is usually detrimental to business relations, even if the ideas are clear. Not only do some errors impede accurate communication, but some irritate non-sympathetic readers, e.g., the frequent misspelling of "r" and "l" sounds by Japanese students, as in "*plobrem*." (p. 2)

Research on the value of the teacher responses to learners' writing is mostly inconclusive (Leki, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Reid, 1993). However, Lalande (1982) found that an experimental group of students who were given information about the kind of errors they made showed a significant improvement over a group whose errors were simply corrected by the teacher. The teacher in that research used a self-editing checklist which seems to have helped the students knowing about the kinds of errors they make.

Many workshops have been organized in schools in order to help learners develop some awareness of their errors through checklists. In a workshop held by the British council, Duong (2014) used the checklist in a workshop with his students. He states that learning through self-exploration and negotiation of meaning leads to students' improvement in writing and establishes a sense of taking responsibility for their own learning.

Correcting or not correcting students' errors is still a subject of controversy. Truscott (1996) took such a strong position saying that error correction is harmful and should be abolished. He claimed that grammar correction was ineffective in facilitating improvement in student writing. Still, some writers argue in favor of error correction (Polio et al., 1998).

Conti (2015) provided seven reasons why direct error correction shouldn't be provided to the learners. He argued that the acquisition of a grammatical structure is a complex and gradual process, not a sudden discovery prompted by teacher correction. He also showed how inconsistent and unhelpful the teachers' comments can be and how detrimental they can be to the learners' motivation. More importantly; in most cases, learners will make the same mistakes over and over again in spite of many corrections. He, instead, proposed an alternative way of dealing with errors such as increasing the learners' error related self-knowledge (i.e. the knowledge of what their most common errors are) and enhancing their editing strategies through learner training and extensive practice.

The checklist solution is a kind of self-assessment. Self-assessment has been given much attention in recent years. As the emphasis, in the teaching process in general, has also shifted from the teacher (teacher-centered approaches) to the learners (learner-centered approaches) and to their needs, error correction seems to take the same direction. The learner has to be independent and autonomous. Blue (1998) argues that the involvement of the learner in the assessment process is bound to enhance learning. Patri (2002) thought that if self-assessment could be adequately improved, then it would reduce the workload of the teacher who could, then, focus on other parts of the learning process. However, many others rejected the idea that the learner should be allowed to assess him/herself. Liu (2003) worried

about the effectiveness of self-assessment on the grounds that poor learners would be incapable of critically evaluating their own written work.

With the above body of research in mind, the question that needs to be addressed in the research I am proposing is the following:

Since self-assessment is a completely novel idea to Arab students, would the checklist as a self-assessment form be effective? And would it give better results than those of a control group who did not run the self-assessment process?

Methods and Techniques
Research Paradigm
The paradigm used for this research is a quantitative one. The quasi-experimental method has been used to measure the effects of the use of a checklist of errors on the second language learners' writing. The procedures of quasi-experimental method are essentially those of the scientific method. It is used to determine relationships, effects, and causes concerning educational phenomena (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). This research project did not use the experimental method because in an experimental method the researcher must be capable of randomly assigning participants to the experimental groups. The quasi-experimental method, which is commonly used in research in education, is a method where random assignment of participants to subject groups is not possible. In Saudi Arabia, students are not grouped at the same level on the basis of their GPA or scores. So, if one has to use pre-set groups/classes, random grouping for research purpose is not possible. A quasi-experimental research should at least involve one variable that has to be manipulated by the researcher to find out the scope of variation between the two groups: the experimental group and the control group. In this research, the dependent variable is the performance on a final exam, after exposing the experimental group to the checklist during the whole semester.

Data Collection Techniques
Participants
The participants are two groups from the intensive course of the College of Arts, Saudi Arabia. Students are enrolled in this program as a preparatory semester for a bachelor degree in the English language. Students' ages range from 17 to 19 years. Each group consists of 20 students. The students have a background in English as a foreign language from high school. Learners' English level is intermediate. The checklist was given to the students during a semester (16 weeks). They have a 2-hour writing course twice a week.

Procedure
In this research, subjects belong to two types of groups: The Experimental Group and the Control Group. In this course, the students should be able to know how to use basic grammar: capital letters, verb forms, punctuation, connectors, and independent clauses. After reviewing the basics in class so that the students will have the chance to review them, the teacher will ask the students to brainstorm and free-write all their ideas on a topic on a given subject. Then the teacher would take the first drafts from the students even if they are to correct them. The teacher will leave these drafts aside for one or two days before handing out the checklists to the learners. Then the learners will be given their first draft and they are asked to go over their work and look for possible errors. They have to put a check mark or X for each item on the list after they review their writing for that item. After they check the

document for all items, they can re-write the assignment and make the corrections. Later, the teacher would require the submission of both first and second drafts.

The students' self-correcting via a proofreading checklist (see appendix 1) has a practical goal. Raimes (1983) suggests that both teachers and students use a checklist that encompasses forms and structures covered in class. She also states that students need to be able to find and correct their own mistakes. The control group will be treated normally as far as error correction is concerned and will not be given any checklist after the writing tasks assigned to the experimental groups on the same subjects. Each group will be taught by the same teacher and will be assigned the same time in order to compose a text and proofread. The difference between the two groups will be at the level of administering the checklist or not.

At the end of the semester, the experimental group and the control group will be administered the same test which is writing a paragraph on a specific subject. The same tests will be administered to the experimental group and the control group before and after the experiment period. The change between the pre-test score and the post-test score will be calculated and compared.

Students will be assessed according to the content and penalized for errors that will impede comprehension by the teacher. The researcher will compare the groups according to the errors made by the experimental group and the control group; by counting the errors made by each group (adding the number of errors of the students in a control group in spelling + capitalization, grammar, and syntax). The mean scores for errors in the tests will be compared between the groups. Depending on which of the two group will make less errors in the targeted domains of errors, the null hypothesis will or will not be rejected. Relevance of ideas and creativity would not be taken into account.

Results
The number of errors in spelling + capitalization, grammar, and syntax made by each group were grouped and the mean score for each group was calculated in both the pre-test taken at the beginning of the semester and the post-test in the form of the final exam.

Chart (1) represents the mean errors in spelling, grammar and syntax for each group in the pre-test taken at the beginning of the semester. It can be clearly seen that both the control and the experimental group have more or less the same results as far as the type of errors are concerned with the highest type of error committed in syntax. This means that both groups have more or less the same proficiency level in writing as far as form is concerned.
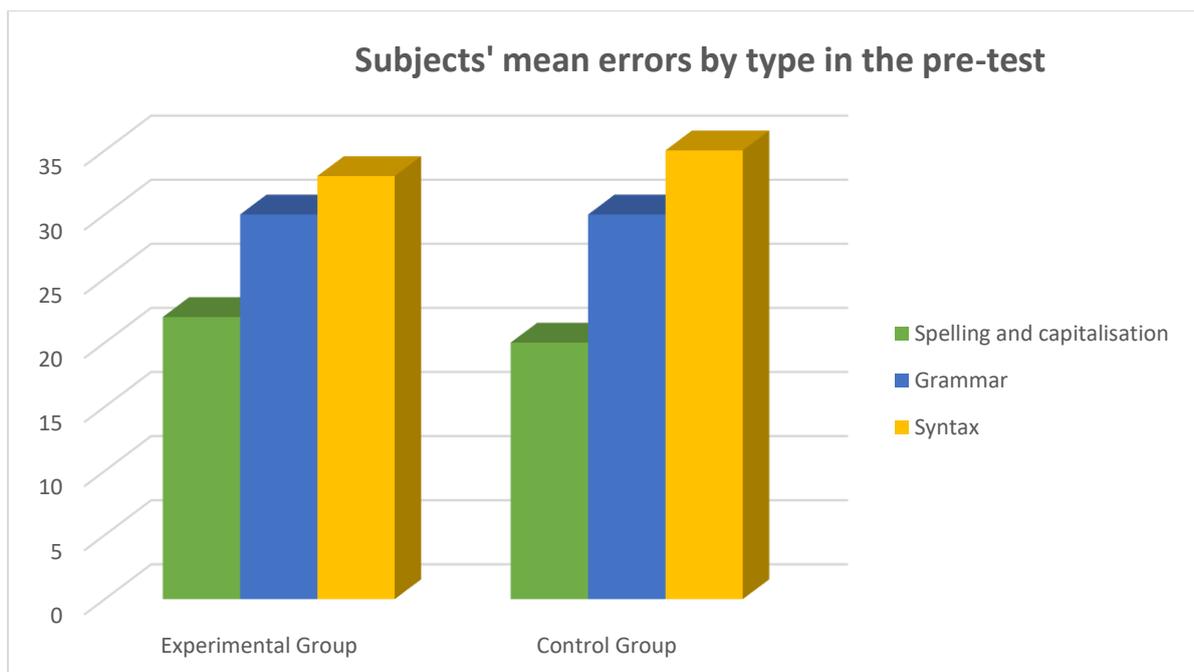
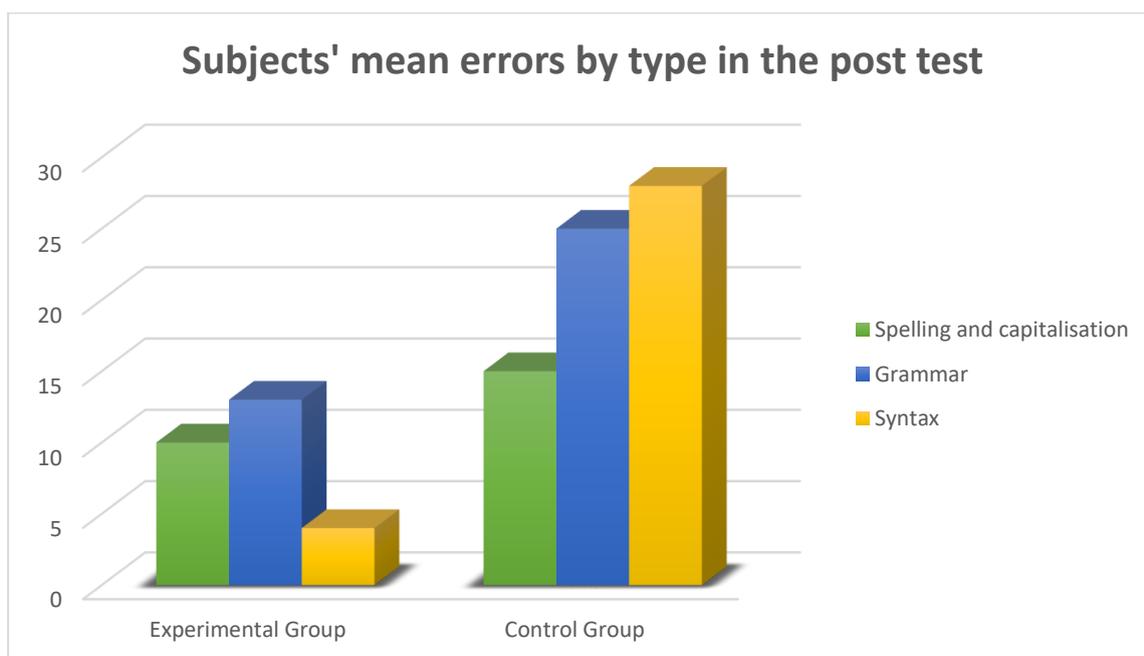Chart 1: Subjects' mean errors by type in the pre-test

Chart 2: Subjects' mean errors by type in the post test

Chart (2) represents the results of the students' mean errors by type in the post-test. The results show that both experimental and control groups have improved at the end of the semester. However, there is a significant improvement in the experimental group — the group of students who were provided with the self-evaluation checklist. The control group mean errors in syntax was 28 whereas the experimental group mean errors in syntax was 4. The experimental group performed markedly better in the 3 categories than the control group.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present research attempted to measure the effects of the self-assessment through an error checklist in writing administered to a group of students for a semester. Students were then assessed using the final exam test administered to the subject groups and to another group that has not undergone self-assessment with a checklist. The results were compared. The results showed that the experimental group showed a dramatic improvement compared to the control group. The self-evaluation checklist helped the learners perform better in the categories put under focus, namely spelling and capitalization, grammar, and syntax.

There are many researches stating that students self-assessing themselves is beneficial for the progress of the students and that when students' errors are just corrected by the teacher, students often pay little attention to them (Lalande, 1982). This present study will allow the researchers to try to conduct research in the other skills and shed light on writing and encourage the teacher to use this method of error correction in their writing courses. It will also help in looking for better ways in the students' self-assessment.

Before generalizing the findings of the study, we must be aware of some limitations. The control group was not assigned the same treatment as the experimental group. Benefits from the exposition to the checklist error should be for both groups. The number of the participants was also limited -25 per group.

Many studies (Truscott, 1996; Yalvaç & Kahraman, 2015; Jarrah, 2016 amongst others) supported the use of corrective feedback and proposed many ways to do it. Ferris & Roberts (2005) supported learners' self- editing and looked into the explicitness of the feedback and found that the less explicit feedback seemed to help the students to self-edit just as well as corrections coded by error-type did help learners. In this sense, the present research should be valuable for both the student and the teacher. Self-editing with a checklist gives students information on the nature of their errors: they must read error descriptions, reread their drafts and reflect upon what corrections to make. Conversely, when students' errors are just corrected by the teacher, students often pay little attention to them (Lalande, 1982). Teachers will seek to use this process as it saves them valuable time, helps students understand and correct their own mistakes, and puts responsibility for learning on the students too. It also shows the teacher — via a review of the two drafts —which errors students are perceiving and which they are not seeing at all, thereby identifying problems to cover in class. But perhaps the biggest advantage is that if students self-edit properly, the teacher can focus on content and rhetoric.

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Appendix 1: Proofreading Checklist

Instructions: After you've finished your first draft (the first writing of a paper) use this list to go over it and look for errors. Put a check mark or X for each item on the list after you've reviewed your writing for that item. After you've checked your document for all items, rewrite it and make the corrections.

Sentences, Clauses & Punctuation

_____ Each sentence and name begins with a capital letter.

_____ Each *dependent* clause is connected to an independent clause that completes its meaning.

_____ Every *dependent* clause either ends with a period, a question mark, or exclamation mark or is joined properly (not with only a comma) to another clause.

_____ Every clause (and sentence) has at least one verb and one subject.

Verbs

_____ All verbs use the correct tense for your meaning.

_____ All past participles (eaten, gone, etc.) used as verbs have BE or HAVE auxiliary verbs in front of them.

_____ Every present-tense verb (or auxiliary) for singular, third-person subjects (he, she, Mr. Smith, the company, etc.) ends with an "s."

Number Agreement

_____ Singular articles (a/an) are not used with plural or non-count nouns.

Pronouns

_____ Pronouns agree in singular or plural with the nouns they represent (for example, Americans tend to be individualistic. They often like to do things alone.)

_____ Each pronoun you use is clearly related to a noun or nouns that come before it.

Words & Word Forms

_____ The words you've used are in the correct form (verb, noun, adjective, etc.).

_____ You've checked the spelling of words you're not sure about.

_____ You've looked up word meanings you're not sure about in an *English-English* dictionary.
Adapted from South, I. (1998). The Writing teacher's friend: An editing checklist for students. Retrieved on May 28th, 2015 from http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/98/mar/south.html.