

## **EFL Teachers' Corrective Feedback and Students' Revision in a Peruvian University: A descriptive study**

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the EFL teachers' written corrective feedback (CF) techniques and their EFL students' ability to integrate the CF while revising their texts. A total of 72 EFL students and 4 EFL teachers participated in this study. The data were collected through explicitation interviews administered to teachers and students, as well as through students' written productions. A content analysis was carried out employing three pre-established categories: types of students' errors (Guénette & Lyster, 2013), types of teachers' feedback (Guénette, 2010), and types of students' revisions (Ferris, 2006). Results showed that *error identification with error code* was the most frequent type of written CF used by the two teachers in the pre intermediate groups and one of the teachers in the upper intermediate group; whereas, the other teacher in the upper intermediate group used mainly *direct error correction without comment* when providing feedback. In addition, results showed that although students from different levels undertook revisions of their errors in different ways, most were ultimately able to correct their errors.

**Keywords:** Written corrective feedback, types of errors, students' revisions, EFL, ESL.

### **Introduction**

Considerable attention has been given to corrective feedback (CF) in second (SLA) and foreign (FLA) language acquisition on both theoretical and pedagogical grounds, but research results of the role of CF in SLA have not been homogenous (Lira-Gonzales, 2012).

As is the case with oral corrective feedback, written corrective feedback (WCF) has been theoretically and empirically controversial. In several reports, Truscott (1996, 2004;2007) claimed that error correction in English as a second language (ESL) writing programs should be abandoned because it is ineffective and harmful. Truscott's provocative views led to many experimental and quasi-experimental studies designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of WCF. These studies also compared the effects of two specific WCF categories, namely, direct WCF (refers to reactions to errors in which the teacher provides the correct form) and indirect WCF (which pushes students to self-correct through, for example, coding errors).

Although teacher feedback studies have consistently shown that second language (L2) teachers, despite Truscott's position, *do* provide WCF to their language learners (Guénette &

Lyster, 2013), these practices have been left relatively unexplored (Furneau, Paran, & Fairfax, 2007). Furthermore, in WCF literature, unlike in oral CF literature, there is a lack of descriptive research designed to explore how teachers correct errors and how students react to the obtained CF (Ammar, Daigle, & Lefrancois, 2016; Guenette & Lyster, 2013; Lee, 2013).

To fill the void of empirical evidence concerning WCF usage, the present study seeks to investigate 1) the types of errors made by EFL students at a Peruvian university, 2) how teachers of EFL react to their students' written errors, and 3) how learners use the obtained feedback.

The results of this investigation seek to inform EFL teachers' CF practices for the benefit of students' learning.

### **The problem**

For decades, writing and writing instruction have often been viewed from a learning-to-write perspective, which states that writing should be taught when students' L2 development is sufficiently advanced. Recent research, however, shows that writing has a major role in promoting L2 development; from this writing-to-learn perspective, writing is seen as a tool for language learning (Haeklau, 2002; Manchon, 2009, 2011; Williams, 2012) that allows L2 learners to integrate new knowledge, test hypotheses, and automatize knowledge (Williams, 2012).

The postulation that CF helps learners revise their texts and, possibly, learn the language, implies that it is important to both understand the place of CF in the EFL classroom and explore the CF practices of EFL teachers. This would also seem to necessitate study of the revision patterns that result from the CF provided by teachers (Ammar et al., 2016; Lira-Gonzales, 2012).

To fill this gap in the research both in generally, and more specifically, in Peru, the present study sets out to identify the feedback techniques used by teachers to correct their students written productions by examining the resulting revisions.

### **Research Questions**

This study's primary research questions are as follows:

- Q1. What are the types of errors made by EFL students in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate classes at a Peruvian university?
- Q2. What are the different written corrective feedback techniques used by their EFL teachers?
- Q3. How do these EFL students integrate the corrective feedback while revising their texts?

### **Literature Review**

Corrective feedback is defined as any indication to the learners that their use of the target language (TL) is incorrect (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In writing, CF on form is concerned with any incorrect grammatical or lexical use of the TL. It is distinguished from feedback on content, which refers to any comment, suggestion, question, or request for clarification, elaboration, or information provided by the teacher as pertaining to the ideas, organization, style, and rhetorical structure of the text (Hyland, 2010). Providing the correct form or structure is a direct correction strategy. Direct corrections may take various forms, including crossing out superfluous words or phrases, inserting missing words, bracketing misplaced words and indicating their proper placement in the sentence, or writing the correct form above the errors, either across it or beside in the margin (Ferris, 2006). Indirect correction strategies, on the other hand, refer to those that teachers use to indicate an error has been made without providing the correct form. There is also a further distinction to be made between coded and uncoded indirect corrections. Coded feedback

is when the teacher indicates the type of error using a code that is known to the learners - for example, *SP* for a spelling error. Uncoded feedback is when the teacher indicates the location of the error using various techniques - such as circling, underlining, inserting arrows, using question marks or counting the number of errors in the margin - but leaves the learner to diagnose the error on their own (Lee, 2013). Ellis (2008) provides a typology of the feedback options available to teachers, in which he establishes a further distinction between indirect uncoded feedback and feedback accompanied by codes or brief grammatical explanations; the latter, he refers to as metalinguistic CF. Advice found in published research on CF has generally pointed to the use of strategies that involve learners in cognitive problem solving, an activity hypothesized to facilitate acquisition (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2001).

Researchers agree that CF is not a unidimensional practice and that teachers should consider a variety of factors when they provide written feedback (Kormos, 2012), including linguistic variables (such as the category of error: syntax, spelling or lexis), variables specific to the individual learner (such as motivation, aptitude, skill level, learning disabilities and age), and contextual variables (such as L1 or L2) must be taken into account by the teacher when providing written feedback. These same variables are supposed to influence the ability of students to revise their own texts following feedback provision (Ferris, 2006; Hendrickson, 1980). However, few studies have been conducted to empirically validate these statements which, for the most part, remain theoretical (Ferris, 2010; Ortega, 2012).

### Method

The following section presents information concerning the research methodology of this qualitative descriptive study.

#### Participants and research context

The present study was carried out in two pre-intermediate and two upper-intermediate adult EFL classrooms (henceforth PI-1, PI-2, UI-1 and UI-2) at the Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola (USIL), a private, for-profit university in Lima, Peru.

The English program at USIL involves 4 to 6 hours of classroom instruction and 4 hours of monitored online study each week. There are six proficiency levels ranging from I (beginner) to VI (advanced). USIL has developed a curriculum that includes program-specific optional courses in English, therefore, when students reach English IV, they can pursue bilingual studies. In addition, to graduate from USIL, students are required to pass an international exam that evidences their language proficiency to be equivalent to a B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

#### Number of participants:

72 (PI-1, n= 22; PI-2, n=24; UI-1, n=13; UI-2, n=13) students and their respective teachers (n=4) participated in this study.

The students who participated in this study received either 6 (PI) or 4 (UP) hours of instruction, plus 4 hours of monitored online study, each week. The participants were 40 adult females and 32 males aged from 17 to 26. Their proficiency levels were determined in advance by a placement test administered by the institute.

Of the 72 participating students, 16 were interviewed and videotaped. Each of the four teachers selected 2 high performance and 2 low performance students from their respective groups. The 8 students from PI were aged from 17 to 21. Spanish was reported as the first language (L1) of 7 students, and Quechua for 1, although all 8 reported speaking Spanish at

home. The 8 students selected from UI were aged between 20 and 26. As with the PI group, Spanish was the reported L1 for 7 students, and Quechua for the other. This individual student was also the sole speaker of Quechua at home; the other 7 reported to speak Spanish.

The participating teachers were two females and two males aged from 37 to 57. One teacher had 10 years of experience teaching EFL, two had 20 years of experience, and one, 35 years. Regarding professional background, two teachers had completed a *Licenciados en Educación* (Bachelors in Education), one teacher had graduated from college in the United States, and the other held a Masters in TEFL. All four teachers considered Spanish their L1. One teacher had learned English in primary school, two in high school, and one at a language center. Additionally, apart from Spanish and English, one teacher spoke Portuguese (beginner) and one French (pre-intermediate).

### **Instrumentation and procedure**

#### ***Written productions (corrected and revised):***

Students were asked to produce an initial draft of a text that would receive a teachers' WCF, following which the students were expected to revise the text. Those in the pre-intermediate group had 30 minutes to write a letter (100 words) to a pen-friend. This task was adapted from the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET Writing Part 3). Students from the upper-intermediate group had 60 minutes to write an essay of 140 words about the environment, a task that was adapted from the Cambridge First Certificate in English.

Both tasks were completed during class, while under the teachers' supervision. Teachers collected the writing tasks and corrected them as they typically would have. In the following class session, students received their written compositions back and were asked to revise them, creating a second draft while taking into consideration the corrections they would receive.

#### ***Explicitation interviews:***

An explicitation interview is a form of guided retrospective introspection based on the practice of describing one's past experiences (Vermersch, 2014). In this study, we administered the explicitation interviews to the teachers and students as described below.

The *Student explicitation interview* was adapted from Ammar et al. (2016) and videotaped. Students were able to choose their language of preference (English or Spanish) to answer the interview questions. This interview sought to understand what students do with the teachers' WCF. The interviewer had access to the corrected text and asked for specific examples from it. An example question is "*What is the first thing you do when you receive your text corrected by the teacher?*"

The *teacher explicitation interview* was also adapted from Ammar et al. (2016) and videotaped. The aim of the interview was to understand how teachers provide WCF. As with the students' interviews, the interviewer had the corrected text and asked for specific examples. Teachers answered questions regarding, for example, the frequency of written productions and the stages of students' text productions.

#### ***Teachers' questionnaire:***

The teachers' questionnaire elicited the teachers' perceptions and practices regarding WCF. The questionnaire had two sections. The first section presented 32 items which were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). An example of such an item is "Corrective feedback must be limited to recurring errors." The second section presented a

student's written production containing 10 errors. Teachers were asked to describe how they would correct each error. An example item is "He go(1) to school everyday in(2) bicycle."

### Data Analysis

We adopted a qualitative approach of interpretational content analysis for the written productions, the explication interviews, and the questionnaire.

#### *Students' written productions*

Students' written productions were coded according to the following categories: a) *Students' types of errors*, b) *Teachers' types of corrective feedback*, and c) *Students' types of revisions*.

A) *Students' types of errors* were coded using an adapted version of Guénette & Lyster's (2013) typology, as seen below.

Error category	Sub category	Code
Determiners	Missing determiner	Dm
	Wrong determiner	Dw
Mechanics	Punctuation	Mp
	Capitalization	Mc
Style	Use of contraction	Scon
	Language register	Slr
First language use	Use of Spanish word	Fl
Noun endings	Singular/plural (i.e., we have one sisters)	NEs/p
	Plural/singular (i.e., we are three sister)	Nep/s
Prepositions	Wrong preposition	Pw
	Missing preposition	Pm
	Extra preposition	Pe
Spelling	Incorrect spelling	Sp
Sentence structure	Grammatical arrangement of words	SS
Verbs	Problems with verb forms	Vf
	Problems with verb tenses	Vt
Word choice	Lexical choice (i.e., raining cats and rats [dogs])	WChL
	Word form (i.e., exciting vs. excited)	WchF
Missing word		Mw

B) *Teachers' types of corrective feedback* were coded using the error correction categories in Guénette (2009), which follow.

Clarification requests (CR), where the teacher asks a genuine question because they do not understand what the student means.

Direct error correction without comment, including complete rewrites (DC). Correct form is provided.

Direct error correction with metalinguistic explanations next to the error, either in a commentary bubble or outside of text (DCw/c). Correct form is provided.

Indirect error identification (ICU), where the error is underlined, highlighted, or coloured differently. Correct form is not provided.

Indirect error identification with error code or type of error spelled out (ICC), either in the text or on a correction chart. Correct form is not provided.

Error identification with comment, question or explanations next to the error, in a commentary bubble or outside of text (ICw/c). Correct form is not provided.

C) *Students' types of revisions* were analysed using the following categories from Ferris(2006).

Error corrected: Error corrected as per teacher's marking.

Incorrect change: Change was made, but incorrectly.

No change: No response to the correction was apparent.

Deleted text: Student removed the marked text rather than attempting correction.

Substitution, correct: Student invented an appropriate correction that was not suggested by the teacher's marking.

Substitution, incorrect: Student incorrectly made a change that was not suggested by the teacher's marking.

Teacher-induced error: Incomplete or misleading teacher marking caused the student error.

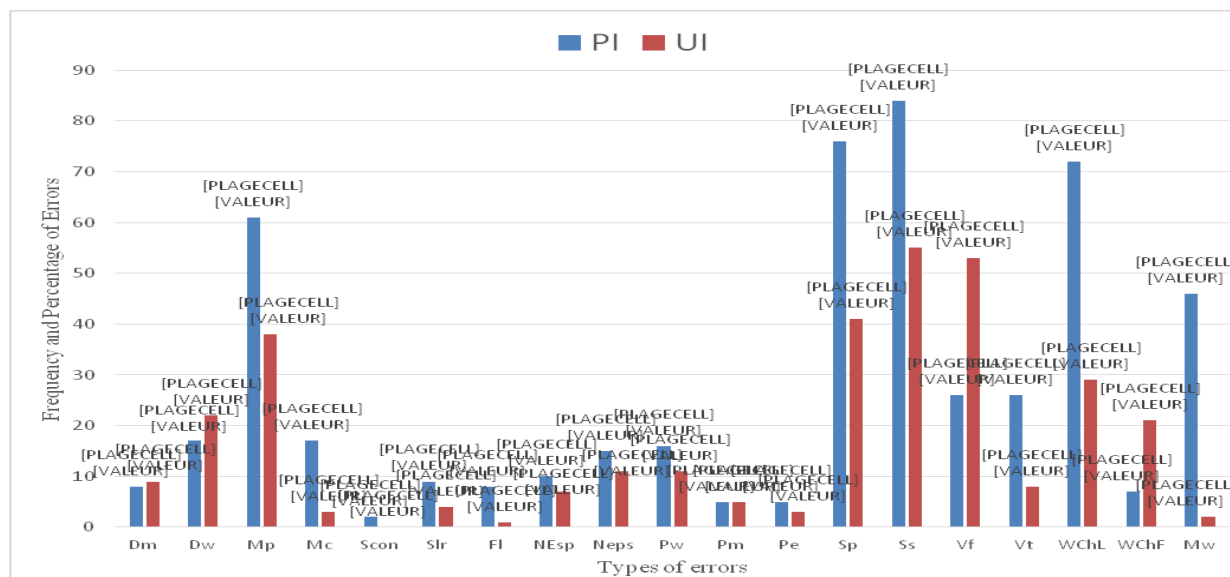
Averted erroneous teacher marking: Student corrected the error despite incomplete or erroneous teacher marking.

The teachers' and students' explicitation interviews were videotaped, transcribed and analyzed using the error correction categories in Guénette (2009) for the teachers and the categories from Ferris (2006) for the students.

### **Results and Discussion**

The first research question sought to identify the types of errors made by EFL students in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate classes at a Peruvian university.

Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of the types of errors made by the EFL students.



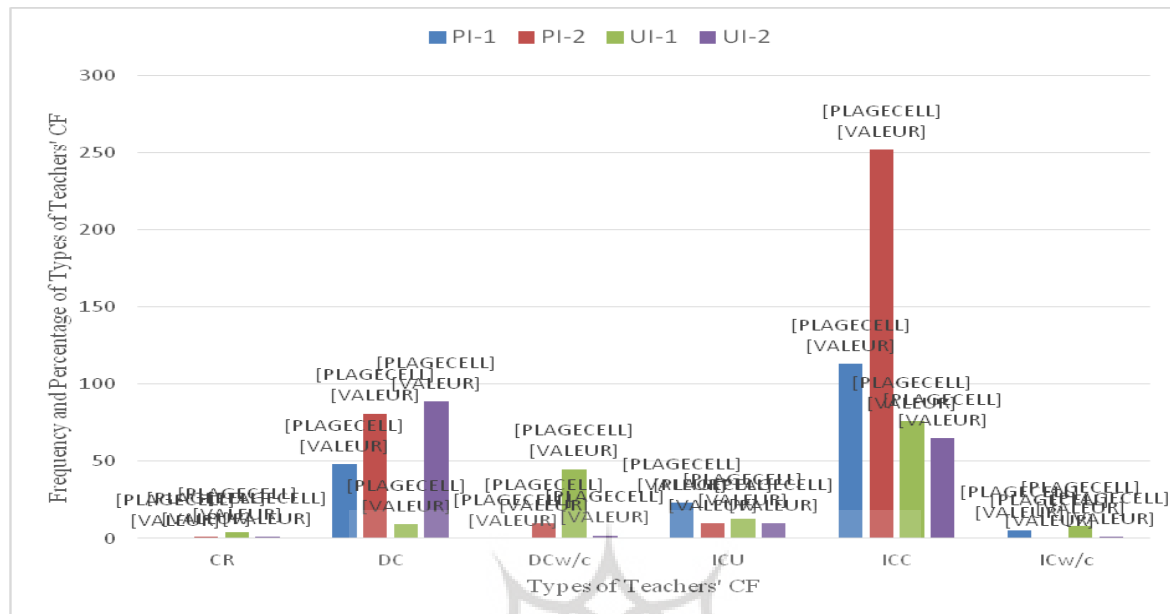
**Figure 1.** Type of Errors Made by EFL Students in Pre-intermediate (PI) and Upper Intermediate (UI) Classes

As Figure 1 indicates, the most common type of error in both groups is sentence structure (PI = 16%; UI = 17%); that is, errors related to the grammatical arrangement of words. One UI student mentioned that he found arranging words coherently into sentences was challenging: *“traté de que tenga coherencia o que tenga coherencia más que todo con la oración pero sin embargo no había sido correcta.”* Another student in the same group reported feeling that thinking in Spanish, his L1, interfered with using appropriate sentence structure in English: *“a mi me parecen más difícil pues porque como me dice la profesora es por que yo pienso en español y no debería.”* A PI student also reported on the interference of Spanish with the grammatical arrangement of words, specifically when forming questions, which are structured differently in English than in Spanish: *“porque o sea en español y en inglés son un poco diferentes ¿no? Hay algunas palabras, por ejemplo el adjetivo, y todas esas cosas que van diferente.”*

Not only was sentence structure the most common error made by both groups, it was also one of the most difficult types of errors to correct, according to the teachers participating in the study. One UI teacher quoted that “the most difficult mistakes are syntax and logic. Sometimes even the connectors do not follow a logical order and those are difficult to correct (because) there is a whole sentence, one or two lines that are not clear. So what I do is I try to understand what's going on, what they want to say and I write what I think they are trying to say with a question mark, so they can tell me later or I make them think of this.”

Spelling was the second and third most common type of error for the PI (15%) and UI (13%) groups, respectively, but contrary to the findings for sentence structure, students reported it to be one of the easiest types of errors to correct. One UI student stated in the interview that spelling errors were easy to correct because there was only one possible answer: *“spelling es más sencillo porque digamos que hay una sola respuesta”*. Another student from the PI group mentioned that spelling errors are easy to correct because they are primarily concerned with memorization; *“spelling por que es memoria simplemente.”* Three of the four teachers participating in this study also agreed that spellings mistakes were easy to correct since, as one PI teacher put it, “you just underline or circle and they will notice that there is a mistake there.”

The second research question referenced the different WCF techniques used by the participating EFL teachers.



**Figure 2.** *Types of Teachers' Corrective Feedback*

Figure 2 shows that error identification with error code was the most frequent type of WCF used by both PI teachers (60% and 71%, respectively) and the UI-1 teacher (49%). The UI-2 teacher, however, mainly used direct error correction without comment, including complete rewrites (53%), followed by error identification with error code (39%).

Two teachers that predominately used indirect error identification with error code or type of error spelled out mentioned during the interview that they explained and used a code list with their students. The PI-1 teacher reported that students were “given a list with a set of codes with a specific meaning to avoid misunderstanding,” where “the idea is that students themselves go over their mistakes and come up with a second version.” The PI-2 teacher mentioned that she “showed them the editing codes and then the students received the letter, then they look at the symbol and they revise the letter.” On the other hand, UI-1 reported that he did not use “very complicated codes; usually faces... and marks, like question marks.”

According to Ammar et al. (2016), the problem with encoding learners' mistakes is that learners still do not know where the error originated from and what rules applies in its respective category (syntax, grammar, spelling, etc.). In addition, they claim that indirect written feedback using codes is frequently misunderstood and fails to generate revisions.

During the interviews, students reported having different views concerning the use of codes. Some, for example, claimed that they did not know what the codes meant; “*cuando ponen por ejemplo ww... no lo entiendo mucho y no sé qué significa*” (UI student), and “*no sabía a primera vista que significa solamente el simbolito que era que faltaba una palabra*” (PI student). Others claimed to have learned more when the teacher used codes; “*aprendo más cuando la profesora me pone los códigos o las letras*” (PI student), and “*los códigos ten ayuda para saber exactamente lo que está mal*” (UI student).

As previously noted, one UI teacher most frequently used direct error correction without comment, including complete rewrites, followed by indirect error identification with error code.

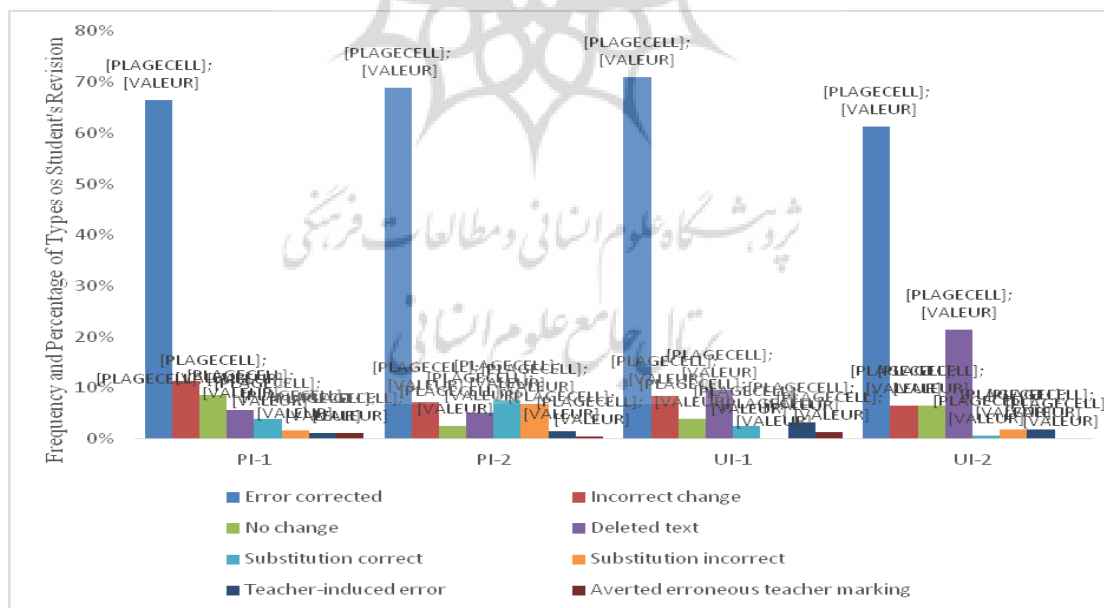


This particular finding aligns with those from Lee (2004), who reported that more than half the errors identified by secondary-level EFL teachers were corrected directly, and the only indirect feedback strategy used was to indicate the location of errors with codes. In the same vein, Furneaux et al. (2007) examined the feedback practices of EFL teachers in secondary schools from five countries and found that teachers responded to learner errors mostly through direct corrections.

Guénette and Lyster (2013) found that more than 70% of all errors flagged by the teachers participating in their study were treated through direct corrections. According to them, teachers may use direct corrections to ensure that their students benefit from the CF because “it provides a model of what is accurate in the L2” (p. 147). The teachers who participated in their study reported that if learners were unaware of their errors or unable to detect them, precious learning time would need to be wasted using indirect coded and uncoded corrections. In this vein, a PI-1 student participating in the present study reported that she preferred that the teacher used direct correction, because otherwise she did not understand what was wrong: “*pero preferia que la escriba siempre por que aqui no hay ninguna letra que me diga que esta bien o esta mal.*”

Nevertheless, providing the learners with the correct form does not necessarily help them understand the underlying linguistic system. Ammar et al. (2016) encourage the use of direct CF for only those errors derived from notions which have not yet been taught, in order to introduce learners to the new forms for the first time. Once the learner has been exposed to the target form, indirect CF should be used in order to favour access to it, as it will likely have already been internalized, facilitating the transformation of declarative to procedural knowledge.

The third research question asks how the EFL students participating in this study integrate the CF they receive from their teachers.



**Figure 3.** *Types of Students' Revision*

Figure 3 shows that students from different levels revised their errors in different ways. Most were able to correct their errors (UI-1 = 71%, PI-2 = 69%, PI-1 = 66%, UI-2 = 61%). The results obtained here align with Ferris (2006) in the prevalence of errors corrected in the revised

composition (80%, in her study). Ferris's results, like those here, suggest that WCF is effective in helping students eliminate errors in subsequent drafts of their writing.

During the explication interviews, participating students in both groups (PI and UI) reported that the WCF provided by their teachers was useful. One PI student mentioned that it gave him "confidence to continue studying," while another from the same group stated that WCF encouraged him "to keep on improving." In addition, one PI student mentioned that WCF was useful because it helped her to "write better," while another student from that group stated that he "realized what the problems were" and that he could not only correct his mistakes, but when he wrote the final version of the text, he would be "careful not to make the same mistake." Similarly, one UI student mentioned that receiving WCF was useful because he realized he had "to be more careful when writing." A final UI student mentioned that the WCF she received from her teacher helped her "to improve" and have a clearer idea of her English proficiency level.

Although the positive comments from the students during the interviews show that CF helps students correct their errors in second drafts, they do not necessarily tell us whether students are able to use these corrections in new pieces of writing (Truscott, 1996). Corrections can only work if the learners notice and process them, and there is limited research that addresses the question of whether students benefit more from simply attending to the corrections or by using them to make revisions. Guenette (2013), for example, argued that students "have to notice the feedback and be given ample opportunities to apply the corrections" (p. 52), whereas Ellis (2008) claimed that "students may succeed in noticing corrections even if they are not required to revise their writing" (p. 106).

Although no study has yielded definitive answers thus far, Chandler (2009) states that there is a crucially determinant cause-effect relationship between students' errors correction in redrafts, SLA, and having students do something more with the error correction besides simply acknowledging its receipt. Indeed, if students are not required to carry out any revisions after receiving corrections, they might simply ignore them.

### **Conclusion**

The results presented in this article respond to the following three research questions: (1) What are the types of errors made by EFL students in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate classes at a Peruvian university? (2) What are the different WCF techniques used by EFL teachers? (3) How do these EFL students integrate the corrective feedback while revising their texts?

The findings show that the most common type of error in both the pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups concerned sentence structure (that is, errors related to the grammatical arrangement of words). Sentence structure was not only the most common error made by students in both groups, but also one of the most difficult types of errors to correct, according to the participating teachers.

As for the different WCF techniques used by the EFL teachers, results show error identification with error code to be the most frequent WCF used by both PI teachers and the UI-1 teacher. However, the UI-2 teacher mainly used direct error correction without comment, including complete rewrites, followed by error identification with error code. In the present study, the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of CF have been discussed in light of other studies, underlining the importance of using strategies that involve learners in cognitive problem solving, such as providing direct CF with metalinguistic cues.

With reference to the way the participating EFL students integrated the CF while revising their texts, the present study found that although students from different levels revised their errors in different ways, most of them in every group were able to correct their errors. Even if students'

revisions do not necessarily tell us whether they are able to use the CF in new pieces of writing, having students do something with the error correction besides simply receiving it is crucial to linguistic development.

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