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Increasing international students' autonomy and boosting their engagement via the use of active self-correction in writing: A transformative approach to sustainable self-regulated learning in Business Schools

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Track: Learning & Knowledge

Summary: (150 words)

Giving feedback is considered an ethical and professional responsibility of the lecturer in higher education (HE). However, students - especially international students - rarely make good use of feedback. The current study investigated the impact of lecturer e-correction and student active self-correction (ASC) on the writing performance of international postgraduate students at a UK university. The results indicated that the ASC groups outperformed the lecturer e-correction groups. Students' attitudes towards error correction were explored through a survey at the beginning of the treatment and through focus group discussions at the end. The results showed that students found the self-correction method difficult but rewarding. They felt that it was fairer because it gave students (especially low-achieving students) more opportunities to reflect on their work and improve it at their own pace. The paper makes recommendations for further research and highlights implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: engagement, writing, active self-correction method, lecturer e-correction, autonomy, self-regulation, student outcomes, EDI in Assessment, international students

Word Count: 2770 words (excluding tables and references)

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Introduction (645 words)

The current study investigated the use of two of the most popular methods of error management used by lecturers in their classes, lecturer e-correction or the so-called digital pen method (DPM) and the active self-correction method (ASM). In DPM, the lecturer writes notes to alert students to mistakes and ask them to correct them. A new alternative to the previous method is ASM, in which the lecturer points out students' mistakes without actually correcting them and asks them to correct them under his/her guidance.

In higher education, corrective feedback is seen as essential for motivating students and supporting their learning. A growing body of research on corrective feedback highlights its importance in the process of language and content acquisition in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) classes. Corrective feedback (CF) has been recognised by many scholars as crucial in supporting international students' writing development. Several studies (Mao & Lee, 2020) claim that CF is beneficial for all students because it helps them identify their own errors and adopt an improved writing style after careful reflection on their performance. CF raises students' awareness of their own writing performance and indirectly supports them as they try to improve their writing throughout their learning journey.

Although mistakes and errors are seen as part of the learning process, lecturers and students spend an enormous amount of time correcting them. Scholars and practitioners have spent decades expressing concerns and discussing errors and error handling. As a result, many researchers have investigated the role of CF in language and content learning. Although many scholars emphasize its importance in the process of language and content acquisition, many experts disagree on issues related to error correction and its impact on students.

Previous research (Heft & Hegelheimer, 2017) suggests that lecturers should aim for error correction and include it in their seminars to support learning. Ferris (2015) provides a handful of reasons for error correction in the classroom. Students should aim not only to acquire a set of automatic habits, but also to discover the underlying rules, categories and systems of choice in the language that the lecturer teaches in class while working on content (Kennedy, 2016).

Many lecturers provide corrective feedback to correct learners' mistakes and errors in language use, and to help them understand and benefit from those mistakes and errors. Therefore, the lecturer's role in corrective feedback seems to be crucial. However, there is not enough evidence that language and content acquisition is linked to direct error correction. Some scholars argue that error correction is actually harmful to students, and that highlighting mistakes and correcting them as a standard procedure in every class discourages students from participating in class, experimenting, and trying new things in language and content learning (Wang et al., 2015). Since all writers make mistakes at some point as part of their learning, one of the main goals of lecturers should be to find out how students view error correction and its impact on their language and content learning.

Lecturers should focus on students' attitudes and views in order to maintain students' motivation and improve their writing performance by increasing their self-awareness of their

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errors and mistakes. Lecturers and students should communicate clearly and purposefully to find out what kind of approach to error correction best supports students and their language and content learning.

Scholars claim that the most important contribution of error analysis is its success in changing the status of errors from undesirable to a guide to language and content learning (Agustinasari et al., 2022). Therefore, the experts believe that errors show the positive contribution of students to content and language learning, rather than being an indication of students' inability to master the new language and/or content, as many lecturers believe. As a result, error correction is seen as one of the most important aspects of learning and teaching writing that needs to be further explored. The current study aims to build on Yang's research framework, which promotes reflection as it often leads to students' deep thinking and understanding in text improvement (Yang, 2010).

Research focus, rationale, questions and research methods (275 words)

A mixed methods approach and semi-experimental design was used to investigate the perceived impact of active self-correction on 120 postgraduate International Business Management students (volunteers - randomly selected). The researcher used a survey to explore students' attitudes, preferences and beliefs about error correction prior to implementing the two approaches for one semester. Students were asked to respond to 31 statements on a five-point Likert scale (Phakiti, 2020), ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The statements were short and specific, easy at the beginning and more difficult as students progressed through the questionnaire and followed a logical order (Ekinci, 2015). Students' attitudes throughout the process were carefully monitored through online learning logs, which students were required to complete each week. With the aim of triangulating the data, the researcher also conducted focus group discussions every three weeks to ensure that students in both groups did not face any significant challenges in terms of the two approaches.

Qualitative data were analysed by the researcher using QSR NVivo 9. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data. The current study aimed to examine the effect of two different types of treatment on international students' writing performance: (a) the Digital Pen Method (DPM) and (b) the Active Self-Correction Method (ASM).

The research questions that guided this study were

- What is the effect of DPM vs. ASM on postgraduate students' writing performance?
- What are postgraduate students' perceptions of effective error management that promotes EDI in education before the intervention?
- What are postgraduate students' perceptions of effective error management that promotes social justice in education after the intervention?

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Preliminary analysis and initial findings from phase one (550 words)

After several sessions of the teaching intervention, the researcher found that the needs of the students in the experimental group were being met as they began to become autonomous. The results therefore showed that the students not only received feedback from their lecturer, but also took action and made more progress. Form-focused and meaning-focused feedback improved learners' use of specific grammatical and meaning-related features and engaged students in fruitful interactions with their teacher. On the other hand, the second group seemed to accept the lecturer's corrected work quite passively and did not ask many questions. They seemed confused and discouraged. Some of them just wanted to hide the corrected script without even looking at the lecturer's corrections as they felt quite disappointed and could not understand some of the comments. Some students did not even agree with the lecturer's corrections, but they did not want to confront their lecturer.

The focus group discussions that the researcher conducted with both groups towards the end of the implementation of the two approaches revealed that the students in the control groups were divided into two groups. High-achieving students were able to understand the lecturer's comments and correct some of their mistakes, although they indicated that they could not understand all of the lecturer's comments and corrections. Low-achieving students said that they felt totally discouraged because their written work was full of mistakes and they could not understand more than half of the corrections made by the lecturer. They felt desperate and did not spend much time reflecting on their teacher's comments as they felt it was pointless. They indicated that they would appreciate it if their lecturer spent more time discussing their mistakes and giving them time to make their own corrections after some initial feedback. They felt disadvantaged because they did not have the right kind of guidance and support, and they felt it was pointless to spend time going through their lecturer's comments and corrections.

Students in the experimental groups felt that they had the opportunity to reflect on their teacher's comments and try to correct their own mistakes. In this way they hoped not to repeat them. High-achieving students felt a sense of achievement as they were able to correct most of their mistakes themselves. Low-achieving students were also able to correct some of their major mistakes and understood how to edit and proofread their work carefully, but they asked for some peer support and thought that they would benefit even more from giving each other feedback and sharing strategies used by high-achieving students to improve their written work. They therefore asked for the opportunity to receive peer feedback and to work with their peers. However, they felt that peer feedback could not replace feedback from the lecturer as she was an expert in the field.

In conclusion, the findings of the current study indicate that students who were encouraged to challenge their lecturer's thoughts, ask questions and engage in meaningful interactions before correcting their own mistakes were able to develop their reflective skills and learn how to improve their own misconceptions about writing. They certainly spent more time and energy, but they were able to improve their writing skills significantly more than the students who relied on their teacher's feedback without trying to make sense of their problems and find meaningful ways to overcome their writing challenges.

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Theoretical contribution of the study, practical significance and implications

- Implications for research (101 words)

This study has several limitations. First, the study only examined the short-term effect of instructor feedback versus active self-correction on postgraduate students, so it did not provide evidence as to whether successful error correction can lead to the long-term development of effective writing skills. Longitudinal research needs to be designed to examine this issue in more detail. Secondly, this study only examined a limited number of postgraduate students in one UK HEI, so these findings cannot be generalised and do not include some students, i.e. native students. They only included first year students and not second, third or even postgraduate students.

- Implications for practice (924 words)

Giving indirect feedback to students is considered more effective than either not correcting errors or correcting them directly. Direct correction is tedious and time-consuming for lecturers. However, some students prefer this method because it is quick and accurate in making corrections (Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

In addition, less proficient students may be too cognitively challenged to correct their own errors without the help of the lecturer. For these students, lecturers can indicate the location of the errors and ask the students to correct them themselves. In an attempt to help all students, but especially the low-achieving ones, the lecturer used clear, consistent coded feedback (Kang & Han, 2015), which according to Ferris (2015), can help students show more progress in the long run than when errors are simply underlined. For example, the lecturer highlighted errors by underlining them, leaving the students to do the hard work of going back, thinking about them and correcting them. In this way, according to Tang and Liu (2018), she likely helped them avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Students in the experimental groups were given enough time to guess, find efficient ways to find what was wrong, and correct it. They relied on themselves to find all the answers, like a jigsaw puzzle, and completed it with the help of their teacher, who gave short explanations. The teacher went around the class helping and giving hints (oral feedback) when students disagreed with the feedback.

By commenting on their work, the lecturer helped them to improve their writing without giving them direct answers. She engaged them cognitively and helped them to learn how to learn by working on their tasks and identifying their own mistakes. In addition, the lecturer actually shared with all groups the points that she had noted and the points that her students were struggling with. In the experimental groups these points were helpful to start conversations, whereas in the control groups they were ignored by the students.

In addition, the teacher used the learners' work anonymously to correct them in class without embarrassing them in front of their classmates (Ro & Kim, 2023), and provided them with remediation on specific points they found particularly challenging.

She also presented models of good writing. The learners were exposed to selected and linguistically graded language, rules and patterns which they imitated, understood and consciously used creatively. In the experimental groups, they felt at ease and were free to express themselves creatively to the best of their ability, using the well-established patterns offered by their teacher, whereas in the control groups, although they welcomed the models, they did not really spend any time looking at them.

In addition, students in the experimental groups were not worried about being wrong and saw the opportunity to correct their work positively. They generated their ideas freely. The lecturer encouraged the postgraduates to be adventurous. They were not just seen as learners. They also had the role of a whole creative ego. They discovered their mistakes themselves, with some help from their peers and some guidance from the lecturer.

Re-reading, rewriting and proofreading helped them in their efforts to revise and correct their sentences and their work. Process practice and error detection proved to be the best way to improve, rather than direct instruction from their teacher, which discouraged students in the control groups. Moreover, as Hyland (1990, p. 280) states, "active correction by the student is more effective than mere passive reading of corrections by the lecturer", which was the case with the students in the experimental groups.

Self-correction has another important implication from the students' perspective. Students' responses in the questionnaire indicated that they preferred their errors to be dealt with indirectly so that they could also participate in the error correction process (Zheng and Yu, 2018). As discussed by Subon and Ali (2022), a self-correction task benefits students, especially international ESL students, because it allows them to take responsibility for their own learning and become more independent learners.

Through active correction, students were encouraged to find their own mistakes with a little help from their lecturer, as Lightbown and Spada (1999, p. 22) characteristically claimed that cooperative activities are more successful than activities done individually. These postgraduate students were encouraged to work on their own, with only some guidance from their lecturer, and were able to correct most of their mistakes. As Egde (1997, p. 24) noted, self-correction is easier to remember because someone has put something right in your head.

In the current study, even the weakest students in the experimental groups were able to identify their errors, correct them and return their work for re-assessment. According to Koltovskaia (2020), learners were able to self-correct between 50 and 90 per cent of their own errors. This experience seems to help them avoid the same problems later on, according to Zhang and Hyland (2020).

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Finally, building on the literature on students' responses to error correction, Ferris (2015) critically reviewed and summarised studies on students' responses to feedback. Students felt that feedback from lecturers was extremely important to their progress as writers. When given a choice of lecturer marking strategies, student writers tended to prefer lecturers to mark their errors and give them strategies for correcting them, rather than direct error correction or less explicit indirect methods.

Of course, as Paterson et al. (2022) argue, student preferences and opinions should not be the primary determinants of lecturer feedback. Nevertheless, lecturers should consider students' needs in their decision-making process and promote social justice for all learners, regardless of their background, ensuring that they do not disadvantage any of their students.

Discussion and further development (150 words)

Taking into account student feedback, lecturers in higher education should encourage communication between students, as according to Vygotsky, language and knowledge develop through social interaction in a supportive interactive environment (Lomicka, 2020). Students should be helped to progress to higher levels of knowledge and performance than they would be able to achieve if they worked independently. With a little help from their peers, they can develop new techniques for solving their problems using their innate abilities, which to some extent determine their linguistic and cognitive development. Correction in this way is non-threatening as individuals are not singled out and embarrassed in any way. In the future, the current method should encourage and incorporate systematic peer correction and engage learners in conversational interactions in groups and pairs in cooperative learning activities that will hopefully increase their fluency and ability to manage interactions in the target language using the written form, gradually leading them towards autonomy.

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