Acquiring English Language Proficiency through Written Corrective Feedback: Is it Possible?

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Abstract: - **This study investigated Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) on whether or not it helped language acquisition in Second language (L2) teaching among grade elevens. The study sought to: establish the nature of WCF teachers gave and to find out challenges involved in providing WCF. Four secondary schools were sampled in Kasama district. Grade Eleven (11) learners were used to assess their perceptions towards written corrective feedback. Twenty (20) learners were picked from each school and made a sample of eighty (80). Five (5) teachers were picked from each school making a sample of twenty (20). Various research instruments were used for both teachers and learners. These included: A test, interviews guide, Focus Group Discussion guide, questionnaires and document review guides. The findings showed it was possible to acquire proficiency through written corrective feedback. The study concluded that, teachers as well as learners had unique perceptions about the practice of written corrective feedback and appreciated it differently. The study drew two major recommendations. Firstly, a teacher needs to use corrective feedback which learners are familiar with and can interpret with ease. Secondly, a culture of encouraging learners to attend to their errors must be up held among teachers of English language. This can be utilized as a scaffolding tool to help learners appreciate written corrective feedback.**

Key words: **Efficacy, proficiency, Second language, written corrective feedback**

I. INTRODUCTION

Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) has had a place in second language teaching and learning for a long time (Swain, 1985). Usually, feedback becomes critical in subjects like language teaching. This is explains why corrective feedback in most theories of second language (L2) teaching/learning is taken seriously as a means of enhancing learner acquisition progress and attaining of linguistic accuracy which is the ultimate focus of Second Language teaching (ibid).

In view of this background, it is imperative to note that language components that need constant feedback are the integrative ones than discrete ones. Oller (1979) attests that, discrete items such as grammar attempts to test knowledge of language component one at a time while integrative components such as writing, reading tests knowledge of use at once. Therefore, corrective feedback should be approached in a way that it is in itself a rich content of linguistic input into a learner (Swain 1985).

Composition writing is one of the activities in language teaching that shows whether or not a learner uses language correctly or not. In Zambia, during national examinations at Grade 12 level, composition writing carries 40%. However, the Examinations Council of Zambia Examiners Reports of 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016 show that some grade twelves still have challenges in meaningful composition writing especially with the correct use of grammar.

Table: 1 (2013-2016 ECZ - Candidature and Performance in English Paper 1)

YEAR	SUBJECT	CANDIDATES	MEAN SCORE%	MAX MARK	HIGHEST MARK	LOWEST MARK	ABSENT
2013	ENG P1	118, 945	32.0	40	32	0	2, 530
2014	ENG P1	119, 635	32.5	40	34	0	2, 435
2015	ENG P1	120, 165	32.8	40	34	0	2, 190
2016	ENG P1	121, 095	33.0	40	33	0	2, 075

Source: ECZ Examiners Reports 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016

At the same time, the English Language Revised Secondary Syllabus (2013), expects that by the end of grade 12 a learner should acquire the basics and common grammar and develop the writing skills which would help them in their tertiary education advancement and in their everyday life language transaction.

Statement of the Problem

As bemoaned by ECZ examiners reports for (2013; 2014; 2015; 2016) on the learners' use of English grammar in composition writing, the study sought to establish how teachers utilized WCF which through research has been found to play an equally similar role of inputting rules of grammar at the point of error correction, hence, the problem question: What is the efficacy of teacher's written corrective feedback in English composition writing assessment to grade 11's writing tasks?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose was to establish the efficacy of written corrective feedback markers which Grade 11 teachers of English language gave to learners written composition tasks.

Objectives

1. To ascertain the nature of written corrective feedback markers teachers used when marking composition written exercises
2. To establish teachers and learners challenges with regards to written corrective feedback in composition writing tasks.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of written corrective feedback markers teachers' use when marking composition written exercises?
2. What challenges do teachers and learners face with written corrective feedback to composition writing tasks?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study may be useful to the following groups of people: Teacher educators and practicing teachers by utilizing WCF more because it provides another chance to explain grammar rules to learners through a clear and comprehensive corrective feedback marker.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Earliest views on effects of written Corrective feedback on Second language teaching

Cook (1988) posited that Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar did not agree with the proposition that corrective feedback facilitated language acquisition. He argued that, language Acquisition was merely a natural process without any effort. It was such positions as Chomsky's that later saw Truscott (1996) roll out a debate to which he vehemently made a stance that the use of corrective feedback in language

teaching was a worst of time. In his published essay he questioned the significance of grammar corrective feedback. He said teachers' feedback to students' grammatical errors is unclear, ambiguous and often incorrect. He then propped that teachers devote that time of providing feedback into yielding other features of language acquisition. However, Truscott's debate made applied linguists to delve more into researching on efficacy of corrective feedback.

Meanwhile some earliest language teaching methods like the Direct Method and later the Audio lingual methods discouraged corrective feedback during teaching and considered it a sign of laziness in mastering concepts and that it led to bad habit of language learning. However, later theories of language learning such as those of the Cognitive Interactionist such as Interaction hypothesis (Long 1991) and the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1994) contended that error correction assists acquisition thereby, helping learners establish form meaning mappings.

Today, common language teaching methods like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) hold corrective feedback at the centre as a mechanism that facilitates proficiency and accuracy. This can be either oral feedback, peer feedback or teacher corrective feedback (Ferris, 2010).

Effectiveness of written corrective feedback on language proficiency

Many studies attest that, Corrective Feedback has been found to shift learners' attention to the location or nature of an error and leads to grammatical accuracy in subsequent writings, (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis, Sheen, 2007). Furthermore, providing written corrective feedback encourages students to read more in order to help them become better writers (Corpuz, 2011). According to Long (1991) error correction is provided to focus students´ attention on grammatically accurate forms within the context of performing a communicative task.

Ortega (2009) equally argues in the affirmative when he contends that, there are several positive implications regarding error correction instruction in second language (L2) classes. Firstly, by providing error correction, students are able to pay attention to the existence of new features of the second language. Secondly, error correction may help students to discover the limitations of their second language communication abilities with their given second language resources. Therefore, it cannot be better said than put in the words of Merrill Swain when she posited that, error correction could function as a "noticing facilitator" that directs the attention of second language students not only towards error, but also to new features of the target language (Swain 1985).

Table 1: The table below shows Written Corrective Feedback Types (Ellis, 2009:98)

Corrective Feedback (CF) Type	Description	Studies
Direct CF	The teacher provides the student with the correct form.	e.g. Lalande (1982) and Robb et al. (1986).
Indirect CF	The teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction.	
a. Indicating + locating the error	This takes the form of underlining and use of cursors to show omissions in the student's text.	Various studies have employed indirect correction of this kind (e.g. Ferris and Roberts 2001; Chandler 2003).
b. Indication only	This takes the form of an indication in the margin that an error or errors have taken place in a line of text.	Fewer studies have employed this method (e.g. Robb et al. 1986).
Metalinguistic CF	The teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error.	
a. Use of error code	Teacher writes codes in the margin (e.g. ww=wrong word; art = article).	Various studies have examined the effects of using error codes (e.g. Lalande 1982; Ferris and Roberts 2001; Chandler 2003).
b. Brief grammatical descriptions	Teacher numbers errors in text and writes a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the text.	Sheen (2007) compared the effects of direct CF and direct CF with meta- linguistic CF.
The focus of the feedback	This concerns whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the students" errors or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct. This distinction can be applied to each of the above options. Unfocused CF is extensive. Focused CF is intensive.	Most studies have investigated unfocused CF (e.g. Chandler 2003; Ferris 2006). Sheen (2007), drawing on traditions in SLA studies of CF, investigated focused CF.
a. Unfocused CF		
b. Focused CF		
Electronic feedback	The teacher indicates an error and provides a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage.	Milton (2006).
Reformulation	This consists of a native speaker's reworking of the students" entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact.	Sachs and Polio (2007) compared the effects of direct correction and reformulation on students" revisions of their text.

Source: Ellis (2009) list of Nine Types of Written Corrective Feedback

Studies on the Nature of Written Corrective Feedback in L2 Teaching and learning

There is evidence that the explicitness of written feedback may play a role in the success of student endevours. In the same thought of argument a study by, Conrad and Goldstein (1999) found that students often had difficulty to react to comments that did not explicitly state that a revision was needed. As a result, students either did not attempt to revise their text or, if they did, they revised it unsuccessfully. Goldstein, (2006) states that, students may not attempt to self correct their work when teachers feedback lacks clarity or, when they revise, they may revise it unsuccessfully.

Bitchener (2008) conducted a study in New Zealand to 75 low intermediate ESL students by examining the effects of focused written corrective feedback on the use of indefinite article "a" and definite article "the". It was an experimental study with control and experimental groups. The study employed two types of corrective feedback modes. These were; written direct corrective feedback and No-feedback treatment. Findings were that, improvement of students in the groups receiving written focused corrective feedback performed better than, the group which did not receive any feedback. However, in as much as Bitchener's study focused on a specific grammatical aspect (articles) in a clear delimitated manner on intermediate language learners, it was an eye opener to further inquire from grade eleven (11) learners whom in a Zambian context are above Inter-mid as a result being a suitable sample to assess how the nature of corrective feedback they received affected their writing skills.

This notwithstanding, Bitchener's study yielded similar results with the study conducted by Sheen (2007) on the use of English articles by 91 adult ESL community college

students in the United States of America with two treatment groups (direct correction only, direct metalinguistic correction groups, and a control group). The findings indicated that students in the treatment groups who received focused corrective feedback performed better than those in the control group.

Studies on the Challenges of Written Corrective Feedback

Alexandra and Francisco (2013) in their investigations of teachers' attitude towards providing corrective feedback to learner written composition reported that: Every time teachers attend to students' writing, they found that written corrective feedback was time-consuming and a tiring activity. They also claim that, regardless of the effort put in, errors still were made in the learners' subsequent writing. However, this finding may only be confirmed or disconfirmed through comprehensive research.

Such over claimed findings are what Guenette (2007) proposed when she pointed out that one of the reasons for the uncertainty on effectiveness of WCF lies in the failure to come up with WCF studies that carefully investigate all sorts of WCF markers and control for external variables that are likely to confound the effectiveness of WCF. This observable gap by Guenette was among the objectives the current study endeavored to investigate from among teachers as practitioners of WCF by getting qualitative views on this practical matter.

Another challenge to teachers on whether or not written Corrective Feedback might be furthered in pedagogy is the ability to respond to a concern raised by Truscott (1996) when he pointed out that, Corrective Feedback helps students to correct their errors in second drafts, he wondered whether they are able to use them in new pieces of writing. It then becomes paramount to investigate through a sort of action research as a teacher on whether or not learners have personal experience of having improved in their use of a grammar component which they once had challenges with through the aid of Corrective Feedback but there seem not to have been studies in this regard to help a teacher in gaining confidence in the use of Corrective Feedback.

Challenges of Written Corrective Feedback related to learners

One of the research findings which language learners faced as challenges with WCF indicates that corrective feedback markers in learners' written tasks are written in a language known to teachers only and abstract to learners. If this manner persists, then WCF will only be a mere formality devoid of achieving proficiency. For example, in the study by Duncan (2007:273) he refers to the injunction of a lecturer to a student to "use a more academic style", a comment which lecturers obviously understood, but which students in the study reported as difficult to interpret. Other CF phrasing that the students in this study found difficult to interpret and act upon included:

1. Deepen analysis of key issues
2. Sharpen critique
3. Identify and develop implications
4. Link theory and practice (Duncan, 2007:274).

Some of these problems may be avoided if only a lecturer may have explained to students the meanings of such comments and their expectations before he/she uses them as feedback markers in students' written scripts.

In Chandler (2003) study, whose major research question was to find out what students did to their errors upon receiving WCF? The research hypothesis was that, some students ignored the corrections without doing anything. This was an experimental study. One group received WCF and acted upon them; while the other did not receive WCF. The study concluded that, if the other group had received WCF as well would have noticed and acted on them and would have shown similar improvements in proficiency just like the group that received WCF.

In Ferris, (2002) study, on use of various feedback markers on leaner writing, it was found out that, error codes were a challenge when used as feedback markers. Teachers were encouraged to use error codes upon orienting learners with their interpretation as they can be confusing and appear vague to learners. This possible challenge was addressed in the current study to find out the challenges with WCF.

The other challenge raised in many studies on Corrective Feedback is when feedback is focused on "praise, rewards and punishment" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007:84). Hattie and Timperley (2007) also noted that feedback is more effective when it addresses achievable goals and when it does not carry "high threats to self-esteem" (ibid 2007:86). This highlight was a strong contention in the current study which among its objectives was to find out what type of corrective feedback teachers used in the exercise books of learners and whether or not learners appreciated such CF remarks.

The notable knowledge gap from the studies reviewed is that the process of verification on whether or not WCF was effective was treated as an experimental activity. Learner input was passive in most cases from the point of view of their perception. Thus from these studies, there is little information on whether or not Grade 11's were conversant with most WCF markers teachers used in marking their writing and how much WCF helped them acquire proficiency in the use of English language. Thus, this study wished to find out from learners their perceptions about corrective feedback and use document analysis to establish whether or not they find teacher WCF to be comprehensible enough to be responded to.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used the Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design for purposes of merging quantitative and qualitative

data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis in the interpretation of the overall results.

Sample size and sampling procedure

The sample size of learners was eighty (80), while teachers of English language were twenty (20). Total participant sample was 100. Secondary schools with senior secondary learners were sampled simple randomly. Learners were simple randomly sampled. Composition exercise books were randomly picked for document analysis. Teachers were purposively sampled. Only those who had taught English language to senior grades for more than five years and those who were examinations markers of English composition.

Research collection instruments

Research instruments used include: a competence test, interview guides, focus group discussion guides and document analysis guides.

Data collection Procedures

Information from teachers was collected through interviews and survey questionnaires as well as voice recorders. From learners, data were collected through focus group discussion guides and document review for their composition exercise books.

Data analysis procedure

The data from teachers' views as recorded on tape recorders were grouped according to emerging themes and analyzed. The data collected from learners in FGD was analyzed thematically through emerging themes. To analyse corrective feedback markers in learners' composition exercise books, a document analysis table was use: adopted from Ellis (2009) template for Types of Corrective Feedback.
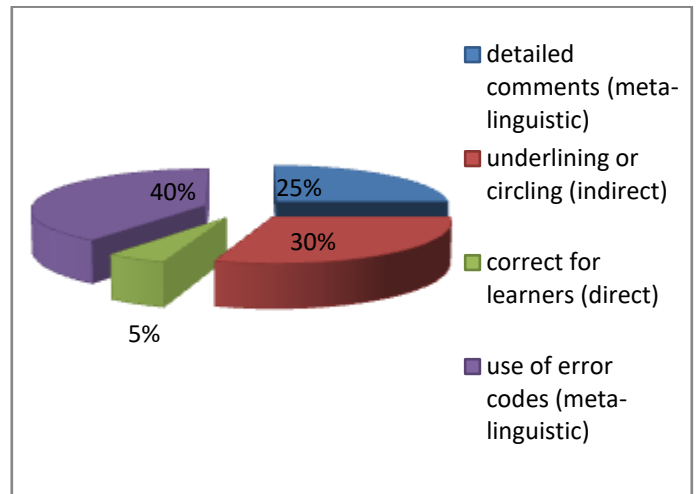

Figure 4: Shows Teachers' dominant marking style for composition tasks

Source: Field data, (2017)

8 teachers indicated error codes as their preferred marker. 30% (6 teachers) preferred underlining and circling. 25% (5 teachers) pointed at detailed comments. Lastly 5% (1 teacher) said direct corrective feedback.

Specific written corrective feedback markers found in learners' composition exercise books Document review was done to inquire the nature of written corrective feedback teachers provided to their learners so as to triangulate with the views given by teachers during interviews. The researcher used the Ellis (2009) inventory template of forms of written corrective feedback. From the 40 composition exercise books sampled, each of the type of written corrective feedback was counted according to the number of times it appeared in each and every sampled composition exercise books in order to determine its frequency of use.

Summary of common feedback markers from document review (exercise books) obtained from 4 schools

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

What is the nature of written corrective feedback teachers provided in learners written tasks?

SCHOOL	SCHOOL 'A'	SCHOOL 'B'	SCHOOL 'C'	SCHOOL 'D'	TOTAL
Direct Corrective Feedback	20	31	45	40	**136**
Indirect Corrective Feedback	40	60	63	57	**220**
Meta-linguistics: Error code Brief grammatical description	17 28	24 42	11 29	18 30	**70** **129**
The focus of the feedback Focused (on particular item) Unfocused (general comment)	2 3	0 5	0 5	0 5	**2** **18**
Reformulation	0	0	0	0	**0**
Teachers' emotional and shouting comments	3	8	5	8	**24**

Template adopted from Ellis (2009) inventory of types of written corrective feedback markers

Source: Field data, (2017)

The researcher established a corrective feedback marker in the learners' exercise books which was later termed '*Teachers emotional and shouting comments*'. These were hash comments teachers could use, especially, when a learner demonstrated poor use of the English language.

Findings for both interviews with teachers and document review showed that teachers used a wide range of corrective feedback markers as prescribed by Ellis (2009). This shows that teachers were motivated differently to indicate corrective feedback markers in learners' exercise books. This is consistent with (Ferris, 2003b), when he suggested that teachers should provide feedback for students on a variety of writing problems and focus on specific issues depending on the need of individual students. Strength on this matter is also provided by the Output theory used in this study by Swain (1985) when she contended that, teachers should consider giving corrective feedback to students until at a point that the learner will not need to continue to obtain comprehensible corrective feedback input in writing. This implies that a teacher needs to be tactful in the use corrective feedback markers. They needed to understand their learner's ability to correct own written work with a guided corrective feedback type.

Nature of written corrective feedback that motivated learners to attend to their own error Emerging themes from interviews and Focus Group Discussions indicated the following as motivators for learners to attend to own errors: Obtaining a failing mark, teacher clear and motivating comments and teacher emphasis.

A female learner from School 'A' said;

> *A failing grade was the number one motivator of us pupils to make corrections. For example when my friend gets a higher mark, let's say above the passing mark, then I get below him/her, I will be forced to re-do my work and even consult my teacher so that next time I also perform better or even above the pass mark.*

In addition to this, two respondents from two different schools seemed to share a common thought on what motivated them to attend to their errors almost immediately. This is what one girl from School 'D' said:

> *The teachers' clear and motivating comment also helps us attend to our errors committed. Pupils love to be treated with attention and so the kinds of comments which are motivating really make us work on our errors than those which are hash.*

On this finding, learners demonstrated that, it was not enough for teachers to merely make comments or indicate corrective feedback, but also learners own personal attitude towards the final feedback marker had far reaching consequences on error correction. Chandler (2003) observed that, what seemed to be

a crucial factor was having the students do something with the error correction besides simply receiving it. There was a missed link between teachers use of preferred corrective markers and what motivated learners to attend to their errors. The implication of learners' preferences with regards to error correction is that the process of corrective feedback if not carefully looked at by teachers might be taken as a mere fulfillment of the field of practice. These views by learners defeat the findings of Long (1991) who contended that, error correction is provided to focus students' attention on grammatically accurate forms within the context of performing a communicative task. However, the responses of learners in this regard, need not to be neglected because they reveal how much teacher's don't engage learners in the corrective feedback process by giving them comprehensive and meaningful corrective feedback. The theory used in this study by Swain (1983) emphasis comprehensive input to be as good as the output (hypothesis testing) that they all strive to emphasis accuracy and proficiency.

What are the challenges teachers and learners face with WCF?

(a). Teachers' challenges in giving written corrective feedback to learners writing tasks

It was found out that 50% (10 teachers) indicated that huge class size was a major challenge to giving corrective feedback. 20% (4 teachers) said a poor handwriting deter giving corrective feedback as well as read through learner's composition. 15% (3 teachers) pointed at grammar misapplication as a challenge and the other 15% (3 teachers) their challenge was learner lack of interpretive knowledge of error codes.

One teacher at School C shared the following:

> *At this school the minimum number of learners in a single Grade 11 class is 78. This entails that for me to successfully mark the learners composition tasks I need to start while they are still in class so that the load lessens. If I decide to wait for everyone to finish and carry the books with me, then challenges of good corrective feedback arise.*

A teacher from School C complained about learner misunderstanding of error code. She said:

> *I find it easy and fast to mark composition tasks using error codes, however, while error codes are convenient to use some learners don't understand and fail to correct their own written work. I avoid using detailed comments they consume much time.*

(b). Learner challenges in attending to written corrective feedback provided by their teachers

Learners pointed at many issues they considered as challenges in attending to their committed errors. These ranged from few or no comment, teacher hash comments, use of new error codes. A girl from school B shared with the researcher how lack of a comment in a marked composition exercise book can distract a learner from attending to a lowly graded composition. She said:

> *If there is one thing that discourages us pupils to make corrections to our compositions is when a teacher just puts a general comment or no any comment at all, but they give you a low mark, may be 6 out of 20. This leaves you without an idea why you have been given such a low mark.*

On a similar concern yet in another school at School 'A', learners placed the blame on teachers' use of hash and attacking language in their exercise books. One boy sited some common hash comments his teacher often commented in his and his friend's books. He said:

> *Some teachers use hash comments, like: don't be dull, be serious, this is rubbish. They end up frustrating us and we just pack our books without making any correction.*

Learners at School C did not appreciate their teacher's use of error codes as they were familiar with too few of them like 'sp'. One boy said:

> *It is so surprising for a teacher to use a symbol which he understands alone and expect you to understand it too. This is what my teacher of English does. He likes using symbols and signs and too much red ink full of symbols. He doesn't explain what they mean to us. So how can you make corrections even you sir if that happened to you? There is no way. So some teachers in short they don't care when marking.*

The responses of the learners' challenges on hash comments confirm the findings of Hattie and Timperley (2007) who noted that, feedback is more effective when it addresses achievable goals and when it does not carry high threats to self-esteem. The implication of hash comments in this regard is that teachers would end up labelling a learner and if such a learner had low self esteem he/she was definitely going to hate the teacher and subsequently lose interest in the subject.

Furthermore, Learners' complaints on use of indirect corrective feedback are found to be consistent with the findings of Goldstein (2006) who found that, students may not attempt to self correct their work when teachers' corrective feedback lacks clarity or if revised, learners were to revise it unsuccessfully. The other notable challenge was what learners termed as 'new and not easy to figure out error codes', Lee (1997) in his study found that, students failed to correct errors not because they lacked grammatical knowledge but because they could not detect the errors with the codes or clues used by their teachers. The implication of this is that, the teachers who did not adopt a consistent type of corrective feedback familiar to their learners; especially error codes were the cause of this negative perception which learners had towards corrective feedback.

The findings on teacher challenges should be noted that it can only be the very teacher to find lasting solutions to them by appreciating the role of corrective feedback in second Language teaching. Firstly, teachers need to orient learners on the meaning of error codes and other indirect types of written corrective feedback as well as the general purpose of corrective feedback. In the case of error codes, Ferris, (2002) noted that, teachers are encouraged to use consistent coded feedback that is supported by systematic grammar instruction as codes in feedback provision can be confusing for both teachers and students. Out of the noted challenges, only the aspect of teacher pupil-ratio might be beyond a teacher's control as enrolment issues are purely government policy issues, however, a teacher who appreciates the role of feedback in L2 teaching, may endure amidst huge class size and have a focus on the results of language proficiency of that classroom population of learners.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study was anchored on finding out the possibility of learners in grade 11 attaining proficiency in English language through receiving corrective feedback. It was concluded that, teachers did not use corrective feedback in accordance with the level of learner's competency of corrective feedback markers which in turn appeared to other learners to have been meaningless. Some learners showed that they were ready to learn through corrective feedback if only their teacher used it comprehensively. This confirmed that it is possible to acquire proficiency through provision of comprehensible Written Corrective Feedback.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations were made.

1. In order for corrective feedback to be meaningful, teachers of English language needed to use feedback markers which can be comprehended by learners.
2. Schools through teachers of English language should develop a culture of encouraging learners to attend to their errors in accordance with corrective feedback .

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