

[Pedagogy]

The Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on Error Corrections in Non-English Majors' English Writings

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Abstract: As a main type of feedback, written corrective feedback (WCF) includes direct written corrective feedback (DWCF) and indirect written corrective feedback (IWCF). Although the important role feedback plays have been widely acknowledged, the effect of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy and the effect of DWCF and IWCF in correcting different types of errors in EFL contexts have not been sufficiently studied. Therefore, this study uses content analysis and interview as research methods to explore the impact of WCF, DWCF, and IWCF on writing accuracy. It is found that WCF can effectively and continuously improve students' writing accuracy. Also, DWCF and IWCF can both help students correct all the substance errors. DWCF and IWCF have similar effects on correcting discourse errors, although students cannot correct all of these errors. As for text errors, DWCF can help students correct them more effectively than IWCF.

Keywords: written corrective feedback; direct written corrective feedback; indirect written corrective feedback; errors in writing

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1. Introduction

Corrective feedback, also called negative feedback, error feedback, or negative evidence, is common for teachers to help students develop linguistic accuracy in ESL/EFL contexts. Lightbown & Spada (1999) considered corrective feedback as "any indication to the learners that the use of target language is incorrect, which is used to make students pay more attention to what they haven't mastered". The crucial role played by corrective feedback is generally agreed by L2 researchers, although questions about how and when to provide

feedback for it to be effective remain unresolved (Gennaro & Monika 2021: 290).

As a main type of feedback, written corrective feedback (WCF) is defined as a written form of corrective feedback provided by teachers to correct students' errors and improve their writing accuracy. As for WCF classification, Ellis (2008) listed six kinds of WCFs, including DWCF, IWCF, meta-linguistic corrective feedback, focused and unfocused corrective feedback, electronic corrective feedback, and reformulation. As this paper mainly focuses on DWCF and IWCF, the other types of WCF are not further explained here. In the ESL/EFL context, DWCF means that the teacher points out students' errors in their writings and writes down the correct form (Bitchener & Cameron 2005). In contrast, IWCF indicates that the teacher points out students' errors without providing the correct forms. Due to its unclear response, indirect feedback is also named implicit feedback.

Although there have been many empirical studies conducted to examine the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy and which type of WCF is more effective, the findings are not consistent. Truscott (2007) examined the relationship between a decrease in errors and an increase in language accuracy. Although the errors in the revised writings in the experiment group were less than those in the control group, the rates of errors were similar under new writing tasks between the two groups. Therefore, Truscott indicated that successful error reduction after revising cannot truly suggest learning is happening and prove the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy. Some other studies have similar findings, suggesting that WCF is ineffective in improving students' writing accuracy. For example, Kepner (1991) found that students receiving surface error correction didn't make fewer mistakes than those receiving content feedback.

On the other hand, many studies confirm the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy. Ferris (1999) made a review study to respond to Truscott's claim and proposed that if the feedback was clear and in accordance with students' knowledge level, it would play a positive role. Van Beuningen et al. (2012) also found that after four weeks of the provision of written corrective feedback, students made fewer errors in their new writings than those who received no feedback of clear forms and right answers from teachers. Some researchers at home also had similar findings. For instance, Yang Jingqing (1996) discovered the effectiveness of five types of WCF in improving college English students' writing accuracy.

Another important research focus of WCF is the effectiveness of different types of WCF, among which are the studies about the comparison between direct WCF and indirect WCF. However, there is no common agreement either. Some researchers suggest that direct WCF is more effective than indirect WCF. In an experiment conducted by Bitchener & Knoch (2010), 63 advanced ESL learners were divided into four groups receiving four kinds of feedback in which there were three experimental groups and one control group to find out the effect of direct WCF and indirect WCF on the acquisition of articles. They proved that all experimental groups performed better than the control group in the post-test and that two groups receiving direct feedback outperformed the one receiving indirect feedback. Similarly, Chen Xiaoxiang & Li Huina (2009), after conducting a sixteen-week experiment whose subjects were non-English major students, discovered that both direct and indirect WCF could improve students' writing accuracy and that direct WCF works better than indirect WCF in improving accuracy.

However, some linguists hold the opposite idea that students can benefit more from indirect WCF. They claim that indirect WCF makes students engage in guided learning and problem solving and promotes the reflection that is more likely to consolidate long-term acquisition (Bitchener & Knoch 2010). This is proved to be true in Wang Lina et al. (2018)'s study in which a meta-analysis of 26 surveys about WCF is adopted. Additionally, Gennaro & Monika (2021) conducted an experiment in which three groups received different types of corrective feedback. The first group received direct corrective feedback on the first-mention a/an and second-mention the;

the second group received direct feedback and metalinguistic explanation; the third group received only general end notes feedback. They found that the third group surprisingly outperformed both corrective feedback groups, challenging the conclusions drawn from previous studies that focused and selective WCF alone is responsible for observable differences in learners' accuracy on English articles.

In a word, no consensus has been reached until now as to the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' accuracy and the effectiveness of DWCF and IWCF on correcting different types of errors. What's more, few studies have been found to explore which type of errors students are able and unable to perceive and correct by themselves under the influence of direct written corrective feedback (DWCF) and indirect written corrective feedback (IWCF). More empirical studies are needed in this aspect, particularly on the different roles of DWCF and IWCF in correcting different types of errors in students' writings. Therefore, the present study tries to explore the following two research questions:

- (1) What is the effect of WCF on improving learners' writing accuracy?
- (2) What are the effects of DWCF and IWCF on correcting different types of errors?

2. Methodology

2.1 *Context and participants*

Twenty-four physics majors in their second year in an entire class in China's key provincial university are involved in the present investigation. There are 13 boys and 11 girls with ages around 21 years old and with almost ten years' English learning experience. All of them have passed The National College English Test (CET) Band 6, which is a large-scale standardized exam administered by the Ministry of Education in China. The fundamental purpose of the CET is to comprehensively evaluate English education in Chinese colleges and universities. The design of the two levels of CET (CET4 and CET6) corresponds to the two standards set by the College English Syllabus and Teaching Requirements. CET4 refers to the "general standard", and CET6 reflects the "higher standard" described in the requirements. To take CET6, students must complete the College English VI curriculum and score over 425 in CET4. All the participants have passed CET6, indicating that they have fairly good English competence, especially in English reading. However, many of them are not proficient enough in English writing, as is often the case with English learners in the EFL context.

2.2 *Methods and procedures*

According to the teacher's teaching schedule, students were required to learn how to write six genres of essays. Each genre of essay lasted about three weeks, during which the teacher firstly instructed students how to write, and then each student tried to write the first draft of the given writing task. After the compositions were handed in, the teacher corrected the errors with either direct WCF or indirect WCF. Then these essays were returned to students, who then revised their drafts based on the teacher's feedback. After that, they could choose to write and submit the second draft.

In this study, the data was collected from the first and second drafts in the first four writing assignments because of the availability of the data and the long time between the first draft and second draft to guarantee the reliability of the research conclusion. The four writing assignments cover different genres of writing such as practical writing, picture writing, cause and/or effect pattern, comparison, and/or contrast pattern (see Appendix I).

After collecting the available essays, we marked the different types of errors (see Appendix II) in them and calculated the number of errors and words as well as the number of specific error types, which are considered as valid measures of writing accuracy (Peng, Wang & Lu 2020).

After the analysis of the written essays, a semi-structured interview (see Appendix III) was conducted with 8 students online to better understand students' evaluations of feedback and their suggestions for teachers' giving written feedback. The interview with each student lasted about 15 minutes and was audio-recorded after seeking students' permission.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

As is mentioned above, the data was collected from those who submitted both the first draft and the second draft. All together, 112 essays are collected, including 28 essays of writing task 1, 34 of writing task 2, 20 of writing task 3, and 30 of writing task 4. After collecting the essays with feedback provided by the teacher, the researchers counted the number of words and the number of errors in each essay according to James' (1998) classification of errors, namely, substance, text, and discourse errors. Substance errors include errors in spelling, punctuation, alphabetic case, pronunciation, and format, etc. Text errors involve lexical and grammatical errors while discourse errors contain coherent and pragmatic errors.

It should be noticed that the same error appearing several times is regarded as one error. According to Kepner's (1991) error-count approach, the error rate in the present study was generated by the formula: the total number of errors / the total number of words in the writing $\times 100$. It can be expressed as the average number of errors per hundred words. It is hypothesized that the lower the error rate is, the fewer errors occur in the essay, and the higher the linguistic accuracy is.

To answer the second research question, the different types of errors that were given DWCF and IWCF as well as the total number of each type of error in the first drafts and the second drafts were also marked and counted. If A1 represented the number of one type of error marked with DWCF or IWCF in the first draft, A2 represented the number of this type of error given DWCF or IWCF in the second draft. Then the correction rate can be calculated like this: $A2/A1$. The correction rate is considered an important measure of the effect of DWCF or IWCF on correcting different types of errors.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The effect of written corrective feedback on writing accuracy

To answer whether WCF is effective in improving learners' writing accuracy, two comparisons are made. One is comparing the first draft (draft 1) and the second draft (draft 2) of each writing assignment to find whether the error rate decreases after the teacher provides WCF. However, this kind of comparison is not enough as Truscott (2007) indicates that successful error reduction after revising cannot truly suggest learning is happening and prove the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy. Therefore, it is also necessary to compare the first drafts of the first and the fourth writing assignment to explore whether WCF has a continuous effect on writing accuracy.

3.1.1 Comparison between the first draft and the second draft of each writing assignment

As is shown in Table 3-1, the means of error rates of draft 1 of four writing assignments are 5.1441, 3.

0394, 3.5821, and 3.3485, respectively, while the means of error rates of draft 2 are 1.8121, 1.2842, 1.4714, and 1.8187 separately. The error rates of draft 2 are lower than those in draft 1, indicating that students tend to make fewer errors in draft 2 than in draft 1. This proves that students could improve their writing accuracy in a short time because the teacher provided them with either direct WCF or indirect WCF, and this written feedback quickly and directly drew students' attention to the gap between their interlanguage and the target language (Ding Panpan 2016: 45).

		Number	Mean
Assignment 1	Draft 1	14	5.1441
	Draft 2	14	1.8121
Assignment 2	Draft 1	17	3.0394
	Draft 2	17	1.2843
Assignment 3	Draft 1	10	3.5821
	Draft 2	10	1.4714
Assignment 4	Draft 1	15	3.3485
	Draft 2	15	1.8187

Table 3-1 Number and means of error rates of draft 1 and draft 2 in four writing assignments

The effect of WCF on writing accuracy can also be seen from the changes of error rates of each writing task which can be calculated by subtracting the mean of the error rate of draft 2 from that of draft 1. Thus, the values of changes are -3.3320, -1.7551, -2.1107, and -1.5299, respectively, as is shown in Figure 3-1.

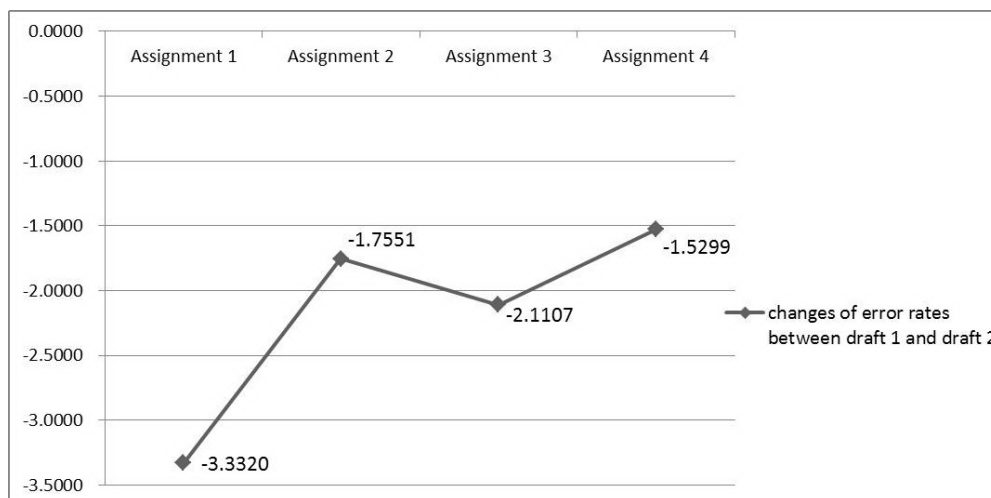


Figure 3-1 Difference of error rates between draft 1 and draft 2 in four writing assignments

There is a general trend in Figure 3-1 that except in writing assignment 3, the difference in the means of error rates between draft 1 and draft 2 becomes smaller with the increase of writing assignment. The reason may be that with more exposure to teachers' WCF in different writing assignments, students' awareness of errors is aroused, and their capability to compose accurate sentences and paragraphs is enhanced. However, the value of change of error rates in writing assignment 3 is higher than that in assignment 2. This may be due to the effect of different writing genres, a topic that deserves to be explored in future studies.

3.1.2 Comparison between the first drafts of the first and the fourth writing assignment

Although it has been clear that WCF is effective in improving students' writing accuracy over a relatively short time, whether WCF has a continuous or long-term effect is unknown. Therefore, the error rates of draft 1 of different writing tasks need to be compared to further verify the effect of WCF on writing accuracy. As only four students submitted their first drafts in both writing task 1 and task 4, these first drafts are collected for comparison. Table 3-2 shows that four students all made fewer errors in their draft 1 of the fourth writing assignment. The differences in error rates of the four students are 6.3865, 4.4459, 1.1042, and 4.9849, respectively, which further proves that WCF can result in gains in the accuracy of subsequent writing assignments. The result is in accordance with what Yang Jingqing (1996: 45) has found in his research that the process of revising is beneficial to the improvement of students' writing accuracy. However, it is inconsistent with what Gennaro & Monika (2021) discovered in their experiment that the two groups of students who received direct feedback and direct feedback and metalinguistic explanation surprisingly performed worse than the third group who received no corrective feedback on the use of English articles. Two reasons may explain the disagreement in the results. One reason is that the feedback applied by the instructor in the present study is holistic and non-focused feedback while the feedback examined in Gennaro & Monika's (2021) study is focused and selective feedback. The other reason may have something to do with the grammatical structure. Gennaro & Monika (2021) addressed only two rules of English articles which may negatively influence their use of other, non-rule-based articles while in the present study, three broader categories of errors are explored. The discrepancy in the results of our study and Gennaro & Monika's (2021) study raises questions as to whether non-focused feedback is more effective than focused and selective feedback, and whether the numbers and complexity of grammatical structures will affect students' performance in continuous writing assignments.

Interestingly, student C seems to make much fewer errors in his first drafts of both assignment 1 and assignment 4 than the other three students. The underlying reason may be that his/her higher language proficiency level is accountable for his/her better performance in writing accuracy, another issue that is worth exploring.

	Error Rates		
	Draft 1 of assignment 1	Draft 1 of assignment 4	Differences
Student A	9.5238	3.1373	-6.3865
Student B	8.1301	3.6842	-4.4459
Student C	2.6667	1.5625	-1.1042
Student D	6.6176	1.6327	-4.9849

Table 3-2 Comparison between the error rates of draft 1 in task 1 and task 4

The result in the present study is also consistent with what we found in the interview. When asked about their attitude towards WCF, all the interviewees thought it was of great importance to their improvement in writing accuracy. And as for the question "what did you acquire in this lesson", most students mentioned that at the beginning, they could only find out a few mistakes when they reviewed essays by themselves, but they gradually knew in what aspects they might make errors and should pay attention to when they checked their writings. Some also said that they had learned a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules after revising, again and again, a practice that can undoubtedly enhance their writing accuracy. However, Gennaro & Monika (2021: 297) doubted the ef-

fectiveness of the revision, claiming that whether the improvement of accuracy is the result of research processing or just allowing students to participate in writing tasks is an inherent controversial issue in almost all experimental studies.

3.2 *The effect of DWCF on correcting different types of errors*

To investigate the effectiveness of direct written corrective feedback (DWCF) in correcting different types of errors, we calculated and compared the correction rates of different types of errors under the influence of DWCF in each writing assignment.

As is mentioned above, the present study classifies three types of errors — substance errors, text errors, and discourse errors, based on James's (1998) classification of errors due to their practicality. In the writing context, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and format errors belong to substance errors. Text errors refer to lexical and grammatical errors while discourse errors include coherent and pragmatic errors.

Because the teacher provides both DWCF and IWCF, only the errors marked with DWCF are counted here. As is shown in Table 3-3, the correction rate of substance errors in each assignment is 100%. And the correction rates of text errors in the four assignments are 92.3077%, 92.8571%, 94.1176%, and 93.75%, respectively, which are very close to that of discourse errors in the four assignments: 92%, 94.7368%, 89.4739%, and 92.5926%.

	Correction Rate			
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Assignment 4
Substance Errors	100%	100%	100%	100%
Text errors	92.3077%	92.8571%	94.1176%	93.75%
Discourse errors	92%	94.7368%	89.4739%	92.5926%

Table 3-3 Correction rates of different types of errors in the four writing assignments under the influence of DWCF

It can be seen from Table 3-3 that with the help of DWCF, students can correct almost all of the errors occurring in their writings. So it is indicated that DWCF is effective in correcting all types of errors, particularly substance errors. It is easy to understand that DWCF can directly and quickly contribute to students' conscious attention to the gap between their interlanguage and the target language (Chen Xiaoxiang & Li Huina 2009: 356). Among the three types of errors, substance errors are the easiest for foreign language learners to correct as they involve the least independent thinking level.

3.3 *The effect of IWCF on correcting different types of errors*

To find out the effectiveness of IWCF in correcting different types of errors, the correction rates of different types of errors under the influence of IWCF in each writing assignment are also calculated and compared. As is shown in Table 3-4, the correction rate of substance errors in each assignment is 100%. And the correction rates of text errors in the four assignments are 70.9677%, 56.0976%, 61.2903%, and 76.4706%, respectively, which are smaller than those of discourse errors — 86.6667%, 70.5882%, 86.6667%, and 76.4706%.

	Correction Rate			
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Assignment 4
Substance Errors	100%	100%	100%	100%
Text errors	70.9677%	56.0976%	61.2903%	58.3333%
Discourse errors	86.6667%	70.5882%	86.6667%	76.4706%

Table 3–4 Correction rate of different error types in each writing assignment under the influence of IWCF

It is clear from Table 3–4 that students can correct errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and format completely by themselves with IWCF. What's more, for those non-English major students in the EFL context, IWCF is more effective for them to correct discourse errors than text errors. Compared with the correction rates under the influence of DWCF, the correction rates of text errors and discourse errors are particularly lower under the influence of IWCF. The reason for this phenomenon may be because students do not have a good command of lexical and grammatical accuracy. As is claimed by Ferris & Roberts (2001: 167), DWCF may have a better effect than IWCF for those who can't modify errors that appeared in writings. The result is consistent with what Van Beuningen (2012: 37) has found in his study that although both direct and indirect feedback is effective in improving English writing, DWCF is more beneficial than IWCF in improving the grammatical accuracy in new drafts. When asked in the interview what difficulties they have encountered while writing, most students' answers to the question were almost all about vocabulary and grammar rather than the content and organization of writing. One student even suggested that the teacher should provide some native or high-level words or phrases as well as grammatical training according to students' errors in their writings. Students' self-reported difficulties in English writing may be an important reason why text errors seem to be more difficult for students to correct.

4. Implications for English Writing Pedagogy

The above findings of the study have important implications for English writing pedagogy in the EFL context.

First of all, the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy verified in the findings implies that it is worthwhile for English teachers to provide WCF on students' writing as often as possible. Although it is time-consuming and laborious to do so, it is delightful to see students benefit from the positive effect of WCF on their writing ability.

Secondly, as the findings prove that both DWCF and IWCF can help students correct 100% substance errors and that DWCF is more effective in helping students correct discourse errors and text errors, English writing teachers can combine the use of DWCF and IWCF when correcting students' errors. IWCF may be enough for students to correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and format errors by themselves to save time and energy for teachers, while DWCF is a more appropriate way of providing feedback for students to correct more complex, such as lexical and grammatical errors.

It is also advisable that teachers give clear and systematic instruction as to the specific error types and what symbols are used to represent each error type in the WCF during the writing course so that students will be able to comprehend and correct the errors more effectively. Good examples of students who can correct the errors based

on teachers' WCF and write better new drafts should also be encouraged and appreciated in the writing class. Only in this way can students' awareness of the error types be aroused, and their ability to compose accurate essays be enhanced.

5. Conclusion

The current study explores the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy and the effect of DWCF and IWCF on correcting different types of errors in writing. It is found that WCF can help improve students' English writing accuracy no matter whether it is in a short time or a long time. The result is different from Truscott's (1996: 355) statement that WCF has negative, even harmful effects for L2 learners to improve their language ability. This discrepancy may indicate that whether WCF is effective in improving students' writing accuracy depends on how the feedback is provided by the teacher and absorbed by the students. It is also found that both DWCF and IWCF can help students correct all the substance errors, such as errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and format. But in terms of correcting discourse errors (coherent and pragmatic errors) and text errors (lexical and grammatical), the effect of DWCF outweighs that of IWCF.

This study has several limitations due to some objective reasons. Firstly, the data are collected from a natural class, which means there is no strict control of irrelevant variables, such as the genres of writing, and the language proficiency level, so the influence of these factors on writing accuracy was not examined in the study. Secondly, the size of the participants is limited. The data were collected from those students who wrote and submitted the second draft voluntarily after receiving the teacher's written feedback. Therefore, only four students wrote and submitted the first drafts of the first and the fourth writing assignment. Therefore, future research could include more influencing factors such as the genres of writing and the level of English competence to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of WCF in different contexts. Also, the samples need to be larger in future studies to have a more generalizable and convincing conclusion.

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Appendix I Four Writing Assignments

Assignment 1: Practical writing

Write a letter to your university library, making suggestions for improving its service. You should write about 100 words on a piece of A4 paper. Do not sign your name at the end of the letter. Use “Li Ming” instead. You do not need to write the address.

Assignment 2: Picture writing

Write an essay of 160–200 words based on the picture below. You should 1) describe the pictures briefly. 2) interpret the meaning, and 3) give your comments. You should write neatly on a piece of A4 paper.



Assignment 3: Essay writing using a cause and/or effect pattern

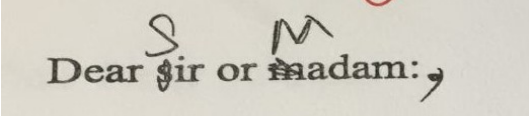
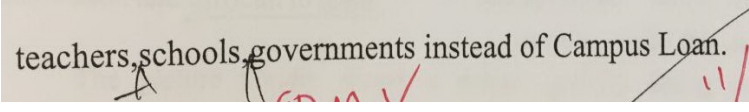
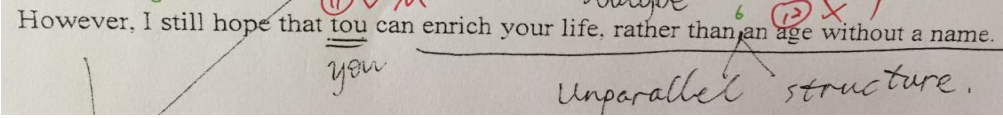
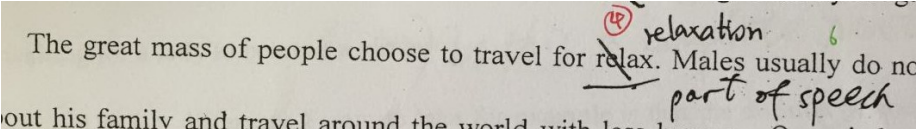
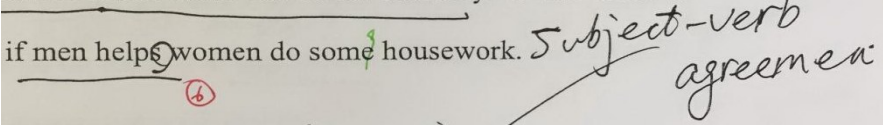
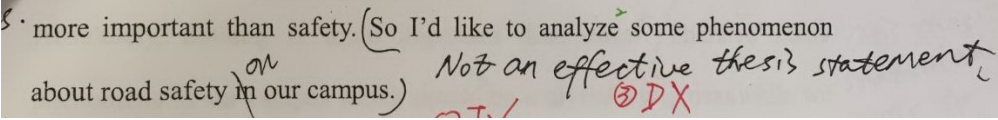
Write a five-paragraph essay with about 200 words analyzing the causes or effects of a certain phenomenon in your college life. You may choose to focus on either the causes or the effects of both in the essay.

Assignment 4: Essay writing using comparison and/or contrast pattern

A. Write a five-paragraph essay on two movies that you have watched, using the way of development by comparison and/or contrast. Remember to use either the one side at a time method or the point-by-point method.

B. Write an essay with five paragraphs on the topic of gender differences based on the mini-film you have watched, using either the one side at a time method or the point-by-point method. (Select one topic from A and B)

Appendix II Samples of Different Types of Errors

Error types	Samples
Substance errors	  
Text errors	 
Discourse errors	

Appendix III Semi-structured Interview Outline

1. Which parts of English writing are difficult for you, vocabulary, grammar, content, coherence, or others?
2. Can you correct all the errors pointed out by the teacher? Why or why not?
3. Do you think the written corrective feedback provided by the teacher is effective in improving your English writing accuracy? What did you benefit from it?
4. What suggestions can you put forward for teachers to improve their teaching of English writing?