

# **An Investigation of Perspectives, Practices and Problems Regarding Error Feedback of English Writing Teachers in Public Universities in the Northern Region of Thailand\***

**การศึกษาแนวคิด การปฏิบัติและปัญหาเกี่ยวกับการระบุข้อบกพร่องในการเขียนของผู้สอนการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษในมหาวิทยาลัยของรัฐเขตภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย**

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## **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate perspectives, practices and problems regarding error feedback of English writing teachers in public universities in the north of Thailand. The samples of this study included 57 English writing teachers in 18 public universities in the Northern Region of Thailand. The questionnaire adapted from Lee (2003) was used to collect the data which were analyzed by descriptive analysis (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation). The result of the study revealed that the majority of the teachers believed that providing feedback on students' errors in writing was necessary and useful. They believed that the main purpose of providing feedback on students' errors in writing was to help the students to improve their writing. Also, most teachers gave error

feedback on their students' writing by marking all students' errors (comprehensive feedback) using marking codes. In terms of problems related to error feedback of the teachers in this study, the result showed that time-consuming was the main problem that teachers often encountered. The teachers did not have time to provide feedback due to other responsibilities. The findings of this study suggested that writing teachers should utilize feedback in order to motivate and improve the students' English writing performance. However, the number of students in writing classes, teacher workload, and other responsibilities of EFL writing teachers were some main obstacles for providing more effective feedback.

Keywords: English writing teachers, error feedback, teachers' beliefs

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### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาแนวคิด การปฏิบัติและปัญหาที่เกี่ยวกับการระบุข้อบกพร่องในการ เขียนของผู้สอนการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษในมหาวิทยาลัยรัฐ เขตภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย กลุ่มตัวอย่างเป็นผู้สอนการ เขียนภาษาอังกฤษจำนวน 57 คนใน 18 มหาวิทยาลัยรัฐ เขตภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย ใช้แบบสอบถามที่ประยุกต์ จาก Lee (2003) ในการเก็บข้อมูล การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล ใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนาคือความถี่ ร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ยและส่วน เบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน ผลการศึกษาพบว่าผู้สอนส่วนใหญ่เชื่อ ว่าการระบุข้อบกพร่องในการเขียนของผู้เรียนมีความจำเป็น และมีประโยชน์ในการเขียนของผู้เรียนเพราะจุดประสงค์ หลักของการระบุข้อบกพร่องในการเขียนของผู้เรียนในงาน วิจัยนี้คือเพื่อช่วยพัฒนาการเขียนของผู้เรียน นอกจากนี้ผู้ สอนส่วนใหญ่จะระบุข้อบกพร่องในการเขียนของผู้เรียน

โดยระบุข้อบกพร่องทั้งหมดโดยการใช้สัญลักษณ์ และใน ด้านปัญหาของผู้สอนที่เกี่ยวกับการระบุข้อบกพร่องในงาน เขียนในในงานวิจัยนี้พบว่าการใช้เวลาเป็นปัญหาหลักที่ผู้สอน พบบ่อยมาก ผู้สอนไม่มีเวลาในการระบุข้อบกพร่องเนื่อง จากมีหน้าที่รับผิดชอบอื่นๆ ผลของการวิจัยนี้มีข้อเสนอแนะ ว่าผู้สอนการเขียนควรนำการระบุข้อบกพร่องไปใช้ ประโยชน์กับผู้เรียนโดยการกระตุ้นและพัฒนาการเขียน อย่างไรก็ดี จำนวนของผู้เรียนการเขียน ภาระการสอนและ หน้าที่อื่นๆของผู้สอนการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่าง ประเทศก็เป็นอุปสรรคสำคัญในการระบุข้อบกพร่องใน การเขียนที่มีประสิทธิภาพ

**คำสำคัญ :** ผู้สอนการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ การระบุข้อ บกพร่อง ความเชื่อของครู

### Introduction

The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and writing instruction is playing a more important role in both second language and foreign language education.

In terms of teacher feedback on students' writing, written feedback is viewed as the most important feedback for L2 students since "it is indispensable in the students' whole writing process" (Wen, 2013). Giving effective feedback to students is an important part of the writing process, and it is also a central concern for both native and foreign or second language teachers. Many writing scholars assert that giving feedback on students' writing is one of the important methods for helping student writers to improve their compositions (Raimes, 1983; Sampson, 2012); however, many teachers may question how much of their feedback students attend to on the various drafts they submit.

Providing feedback is one of the core stages of teaching writing. However, providing

feedback is often seen to be unmanageable in large classes. Process writing emphasizes invention, revision, and formative feedback (Matsuda & Silva, 2001 p. 15 cited in Gunn, and Raven, 2005). As Campbell (1998, p. 10 cited in Gunn, and Raven, 2005), points out, "there is no single writing process". There are three basic stages that writers usually go through: pre-writing, drafting, and revising. For example, students may be encouraged in the pre-writing stage to do some brainstorming, free-writing, clustering, etc. Drafting is the actual writing of a paragraph, essay, short story, etc. In this stage, students are encouraged to go through multiple drafts. Revising involves self, peer and teacher editing. Formative feedback from a variety of sources is considered ideal in process writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998).

Many studies have been conducted on the subject of error correction in writing, studies about its effectiveness are still inconclusive. There are a number of studies that point to the usefulness of error feedback (see Ferris & Helt, 2000; Polio, Fleck & Leder, 1998). There are studies

which have examined student progress in written accuracy over time; therefore, researchers have typically found that writers who received feedback on their errors showed improvement, which, in some cases, was statistically significant (Ferris et al., 2000; Sheppard, 1992). While most research studies on error correction have focused a great deal on whether teachers should correct errors in student writing and how error correction should be done, teacher beliefs and perceptions regarding error feedback have received relatively little attention (Lee, 2003).

However, there are also studies that deny the benefits of corrective feedback. Truscott (1996), in his frequently-cited review article, contends that all forms of error correction of L2 writing are not only ineffective but potentially harmful and should be abandoned. Nevertheless, despite the belief, Truscott notes that EFL student writers cannot make progress in correcting skills if no one points out their errors.

In fact, error correction is difficult for teachers in L2 writing classroom, where students expect writing accuracy and need feedback on their errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997; Leki, 1991). Teachers take on an active role in the editing process of writing, but there have been considerable debates on what type of feedback should be given. Ferris & Hedgcock (1998) believe that such grammatical corrections are necessary but should not be given on first drafts of multiple draft essays. Comments on earlier drafts should focus on organization and content rather than grammar. In contrast, Fathman & Whalley (1990) state, "grammar and content feedback, whether

given alone or simultaneously, positively affects rewriting."

There are many issues that writing teachers should understand and decide while they are correcting errors. First, should they correct or not correct errors? Second, should they identify or not identify error types? Third, should they locate errors directly or indirectly? Apart from error feedback techniques that teachers use, another issue teachers often face is whether to mark all student errors or not. In addition, writing teachers need to be aware of the different levels of students' proficiency.

In order to provide a better understanding of these issues about error feedback of English writing teachers, especially in the Thai EFL context, it is important to understand the issues involved when the teachers are deciding if they should give corrective feedback, especially their beliefs and concerns. Thus, this study aims to investigate the issues surrounding the method of giving teachers' feedback on language forms, that is, teachers' beliefs, their practices, and their problems.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate the perspectives of English writing teachers in public universities in the north of Thailand regarding error feedback on their students' writing.
2. To investigate how English writing teachers in public universities in the north of Thailand give error feedback on their students' writing.
3. To investigate the problems and concerns of English writing teachers in public universities regarding giving error feedback on their students' writing.

## Methodology

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the study was adapted from Lee (2003). The questionnaire consisted of eleven closed questions. The contents in the questionnaire mainly were about the teachers' perspectives on error feedback, their error feedback practice, and their perceived problems. The questionnaire was modified and revised based on the comments of the thesis adviser and three experts. Then it was tried out with a group of teachers who were not included in the sample of the study in order to gain feedback for the revision. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) was calculated. The questionnaire was verified by three experts who were lecturers of English department and had taught writing courses. All items of the questionnaire were rated higher than 0.5 of the IOC. Therefore, it was reasonable to assume the validity of the research instrument. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach Alpha was used to measure internal consistency of the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was .80. Therefore, it was reasonable to claim the reliability of the questionnaire.

### Data collection

The number of teachers who were supposed to be the population of this study derived from a preliminary survey questionnaire which sought for the number of English teachers who taught writing courses at least at a the paragraph level in 18 public universities. Then the questionnaires were sent to those 57 teachers by mail. All the questionnaires were returned.

### Data Analysis

After the questionnaires were collected, the raw data were put into the statistical program for analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) were used for describing the data. The criteria below were used to interpret the respondents' levels of agreement:

Score	Meaning
3.26 – 4.00	Very high
2.51 – 3.25	High
1.76 – 2.50	Low
1.00 – 1.75	Very low

### Findings

The results were presented in the following tables.

Table 1 The respondents' levels of agreement regarding the main purposes of providing feedback on students' errors in writing

Statements	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Meaning of Perspectives	Ranking
A. To help students correct errors	3.42	0.53	Very high	5
B. To give students encouragement	3.28	0.67	Very high	9
C. To help students locate their errors in their text writing	3.33	0.64	Very high	7
D. To learn grammar/ cohesion/ coherence	3.26	0.67	Very high	10
E. To increase student awareness of errors	3.53	0.57	Very high	2
F. To help student reflect on their writing	3.49	0.60	Very high	4
G. To learn how to express ideas/ write better	3.35	0.67	Very high	6
H. Long-term benefits---e.g., leading to autonomous learning	3.53	0.54	Very high	3
I. To help students avoid the same errors/ learn from the errors	3.30	0.76	Very high	8
J. To help students improve their writing	3.54	0.71	Very high	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>0.11</b>	Very high	

As seen in the table above, Item J "To help students improve their writing" received the highest score (3.54), while Item D "to learn grammar/ cohesion/ coherence" received the lowest score (3.26). However, it can be seen that the participants' levels of agreement were at a very high level in all items, indicating that they strongly agreed with all the purposes of providing feedback on students' errors writing, and the teachers' levels of agreement is at a very high level ( $\bar{X} = 3.40$ ).

Table 2 Teachers' existing error feedback practice

Statements	Number of Teachers (N)	Percentage (%)
A. I don't mark students' errors in writing.	0	0
B. I mark all students' errors.	32	56.1
C. I mark students' errors selectively.	25	43.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 shows that all the teachers in this study marked their students' errors, and most of them (56.1%) marked all the errors in their students' writing.

Table 3 The use of marking codes in providing feedback

Statements	Number of Teachers (N)	Percentage (%)
The teachers who use marking code	44	77.2
The teacher who do not use marking code	13	22.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 shows that most of the participants in this study used marking codes when providing language feedback on their students' writing. In addition, the participants who used and did not use marking codes in providing feedback were asked for the reasons in this item. There were many reasons that the participants identified about the use of marking codes in providing feedback. Most of the participants who used marking codes gave the reason that marking codes could help students to realize and learn how to correct their errors. They also felt that using marking codes to provide feedback was easy and convenient for correcting and helped save time.

Table 4 Teachers' problems concerning providing error feedback

Problems	Rarely		Sometimes		Often	
	(Number)	(%)	(Number)	(%)	(Number)	(%)
A. The students are unable to correct their errors according to your feedback.	4	7.0	47	82.5	6	10.5
B. The students still repeat the same kinds of errors after receiving teacher's feedback.	2	3.5	40	70.2	15	26.3
C. The students do not work hard to improve or correct their errors.	9	15.8	28	49.1	20	35.1
D. The students do not understand the marking codes.	18	31.6	32	56.1	7	12.3
E. The students are discouraged by the teacher's feedback.	27	47.4	26	45.6	4	7.0
F. The students feel defensive and resistant to your feedback.	38	66.7	19	33.3	0	0.0
G. The students do not pay attention to the given feedback.	22	38.6	32	56.1	3	5.3
H. You do not have time to give effective feedback due to other responsibilities.	7	12.3	24	42.1	26	45.6
I. There are so many students in the class that you cannot provide the kind of feedback you want to.	17	29.8	30	52.6	10	17.5

Table 4 shows the frequency of teachers' problems concerning providing error feedback based on 57 teachers in each item. According to Table 4, the problem that most of the respondents "often" faced was, "the teachers do not have time to give effective feedback due to other responsibilities" (Item H), while the problem that most of them "rarely" faced was, "the students feel defensive and resistant to teachers' feedback" (Item F).

## Conclusion and Discussion

### ***Teachers' perspectives regarding error feedback on their students' writing***

The result showed the purpose of providing feedback on students' errors in writing, "To help students improve their writing", received the highest score ( $\bar{x} = 3.54$ ). This implied that these writing teachers believed that providing feedback on students' writing was necessary and useful

From the results of the research question one, it demonstrated that the teachers valued their feedback as an effective tool to develop and improve students' writing, to assist the students to correct errors as well as to motivate them to revise their drafts. This was found similar to the studies of Bitcherneer, et al. (2005); Bicherner (2008), Zacharias (2007), Li & Barnard (2011), and Corpuz (2011). The following previously conducted research presented the evidence to support these teachers' perspectives.

Bitcherneer, et al. (2005) and Bitcherneer (2008) found that error correction was effective and helpful for the development and improvement of students' L2 writing accuracy. Zacharias (2007)

studied teacher and student attitudes toward teacher feedback and found that the teacher had a marked preference for teacher feedback. The findings showed that a high majority of teachers believed that teacher feedback was both 'very important' and 'important'. In a New Zealand case study, Li & Barnard (2011) studied academic tutors' beliefs about and practices of giving feedback on students' written assignments. The findings showed that these tutors reflected their belief that the purpose of providing feedback was to assist the students to improve their academic writing skills. The teachers in Corpuz's study (2011) believed that providing written error correction helped students to improve their proof-reading skills in order to revise their writing more efficiently.

A possibility that most teachers in this study had a very high agreement with providing corrective feedback is that they believed it was necessary and useful. It could be due to the fact that the teachers would like the students to be aware of errors and learn to correct the errors by themselves in their writing. Srichanyachon (2012) claimed that teachers' written feedback is a primary method to respond to students' paper to help the students develop their writing because teacher written comments assist in indicating problems and make suggestions for improvement of future writing. Moreover, Lee (2009) reported that teachers tended to correct and locate errors for students since the students were unable to locate and correct the errors by themselves. Similarly, Ryan (1997 cited in Leng, 2014) mentioned that the feedback could alert the students about their current writing skills

and it can further develop their writing while Russell & Spada (2006) emphasize that feedback to students' writing can be beneficial as a motivating factor to assist students to revise their writing many times in order to produce improved pieces of writing. It could be assumed that teacher feedback could have an effect on the students' error correction because after receiving feedback, the students tended to correct more errors. This might be the reason why the teachers believed in benefits of providing feedback.

#### ***Teachers' practice regarding error feedback on their students' writing***

The result revealed that most of the teachers provided error feedback on their students' writing by marking all students' errors (comprehensive feedback) by using marking codes. From the questionnaire data, half of the teachers preferred providing feedback comprehensively (56.1%). This study was similar to the studies of Lee (2003) and Jodaie and Farrokhi (2012).

Lee (2003) found that the majority of the teachers performed comprehensive marking and a large majority of the teachers used marking codes to mark students' writing. According to Lee, these teachers probably thought that error correction was their responsibility and felt that it was hard to avoid this job, especially when the students requested it as they could not correct the errors by themselves. In Jodaie and Farrokhi's study (2012), more than half of the teachers (56.7%) favored comprehensive feedback (56.7%), while less than half of them (43.3%) favored selective feedback (43.3%).

However, it should be noted that the result of this study was not consistent with the studies of Ferris et al (2000), Ferris (2002), Sampson (2012), and Gu?nette and Lyster (2013). Ferris et al (2000) assert that error feedback may be the most effective when it focuses on patterns of errors. This involves allowing teachers and students to attend to two or three major types of errors at a time, rather than dozens of disparate errors. According to Ferris et al, selective error correction strategy also helps students learn to make focused ways through their texts to find particular types of errors to which they may be most prone and to master grammatical terms and rules related to those specific errors. Ferris (2002) claims that many advocates of error correction warn against attempting to mark all student errors because this may exhaust the teachers and overwhelm the students. Sampson (2012) proposes that corrective feedback should be selective since comprehensive feedback may risk demotivating learners and that selective feedback may help prevent discouraging learners from taking risks and experimenting with more sophisticated language forms. Gu?nette and Lyster's study (2013) with high school ESL tutors revealed that the majority of their participants preferred selective corrective feedback. However, McMartin-Miller (2014) cautions against selective error correction that misunderstanding may occur between the teacher and the students when the teacher uses the selective strategy, but the students think that errors are being marked comprehensively.

Other issues regarding the teacher's practice are worth discussing. Some teachers in this study believed that effective feedback should be provided through conferencing. This recommendation was in accordance with that proposed in the studies of Brender (1998) and William (2003). Brender (1998) suggests that written feedback has been found to be effective when it is coupled with student-teacher conferencing. William (2003) also explains that conferencing allows both students and teachers a chance to trace the causes of the problems arising from student writing and feedback and that teachers can ask direct questions to students in order to gain a deeper understanding of student writings. Also, teachers can use conferencing to assist students with any specific problems related to their writing.

#### ***Teachers' problems regarding error feedback on their students' writing***

The result revealed that the teacher often faced the problem about time-consuming. It is generally accepted that Thai EFL writing teachers have a lot of responsibilities, and one of the main problems most of the teachers faced was that providing feedback was time-consuming. This was consistent with the studies of Race (2001), Lee (2003), and Lee (2008, 2009, cited in Junqueira and Payant 2015). Race's study (2001) showed a disadvantage of handwritten comments on students' work as pointing out that it was slow and time-consuming to write individually on students' work. It took a large amount of time when class sizes were large. Also, Lee (2003) asserts that time-consuming and heavy workload were the

major problems that the teachers faced. Lee's studies (2008, 2009, cited in Junqueira and Payant, 2015) revealed that the teacher participants lacked the time to provide more balanced written corrective feedback. The results of Lee's study were supported by Gu?nette and Lyster's study (2013). The teacher participants in the study claimed that time constraints were an important factor influencing how they provided feedback to students' writing.

The reason why time-consuming was a problem that the teachers in this study often encountered was rather obvious. Reading and grading the students' writing pieces are already burdensome. When the process writing approach, which requires students' multiple drafts, is used in a writing classroom, this, then, could add more workload to the teachers. As stated in Alqurashi's study (2015), teachers' responsibility to provide effective feedback to student writing in many drafts is an extra workload besides their teaching load and office hours. Reading a number of students' writing, 20-30 pieces or more, for assessment, correcting errors, and providing feedback can be a strain if not balanced with other responsibilities. Alqurashi also claims that writing teachers often complain that the process of providing feedback to students' writing is time-consuming and sometimes increases teacher workload.

Even though many researchers agree that providing feedback is time-consuming, some researchers believe that it does not waste time if it can help students to improve their writing. According to Paiva's study (2011), the result showed that time-consuming was a problem for providing feedback on students'

writing, but it was worthwhile. Besides, the teachers who were respondents of Paiva's study also provided more detail about time-consuming in providing corrective feedback. These teachers asserted that time might not be an issue to be concerned because they believed that pointing out students' errors on their writing was their job.

Nevertheless, Lee (2003) noted that although teachers spent a lot of time marking student writing, they were not totally certain if their effort would pay off in terms of student improvement.

#### Recommendation

The findings of this study are limited to public universities in the North of Thailand only.

Therefore, further studies should be conducted in public universities in other regions in order to study similarities and differences between the universities in other regions of Thailand.

Besides, this study was conducted only by means of questionnaire. In-depth interview should be added so that more detailed information could be obtained about the perspectives, practices, and problems regarding error feedback.

Last of all, since this study focused on the teachers' feedback on language forms only, further studies should be expanded to investigate the teacher's perceptions, practices, and problems when providing feedback on the writing content.

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