

## Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback Revisited: A Critique and an Improved Model

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### Abstract

Giving feedback on the students' grammatical errors of their written assignments is an issue that received a lengthy debate. Several studies were conducted and produced contradictory results. A model was proposed (Hartshorn, et al, 2010) to overcome the theoretical and practical obstacles. This model is called Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (DWCF). This paper introduces a critique of the DWCF model and it shows that DWCF has two main problems that make it unsuitable for the ESL classroom. These problems are related to its authenticity and practicality. Furthermore this paper presents a modified model of DWCF to overcome these problems. The modified model integrates two aspects; Peer feedback and Automated Essay Evaluation systems (AES) –s or so called Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE). The proposal is that peer feedback and AES will work as a filtration system that can solve the issues of authenticity and practicality that the original model has suffered from

**Key words:** Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback, AES, Integrative model, Critique

## Introduction

Giving corrective feedback on the students' grammatical errors has received a lot of research with results supporting its effectiveness (Fanselow, 1977; Lalande, 1984; Robb. etal, 1988; and Ihde, 1994) and others who claim the opposite (Keppner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; and Semke, 1984). Fanselow (1977) investigated eleven teachers through videotaping their teaching. He found that there is a relationship between different kinds of corrective feedback and their effectiveness. Lalande (1984) Conducted a study on sixty students and found that combining the two techniques (students awareness and problem solving skills) had positive effects. Another group of researchers investigated the same issue on 134 Japanese college freshmen and their results suggested more effective ways of treating students' errors (Robb etal, 1986). Ihde (1994) researched 50 French and American instructors and found that different methods of giving students corrective feedback.

On the other hand, there are some papers that suggested the opposite (Keppner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; and Semke, 1984). They claimed that giving corrective feedback to the students has no value and thus no need to implement it in the course. For example, in her article (Effects of the Red Pen, 1984) Harriet Semke Studied more than 140 students and found that students improved their writing by practicing only. Corrective feedback did not help at all in improving their Written accuracy. In 1992, Ken Sheppard investigated two different ways of giving feedback on 26 university students. The first method was concentrating on the mistakes on the form. The second method was giving a holistic feedback on the paper in general. He found that the later method was more effective in improving the students' performance on the form and the content as well. Kepner (1991) studied sixty students of 201 Spanish to find the effect of giving feedback either on the form (grammar errors) or the content (message related errors). She found that giving students feedback on their grammatical errors alone is not effective. Instead, giving feedback on the message or content contributed in improving the students' grammar proficiency. From viewing these different results, it becomes evident that the findings are inconsistent. These results were the foundations of what will be known as the corrective Feedback Debate.

## The Debate of Corrective Feedback

Corrective Feedback was not a hot issue until the 1996 when John Truscott wrote a very strong article questioning the effectiveness of this issue. In his article (The Case against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes); he started with a very open sentence (GRAMMAR CORRECTION DOES NOT WORK). He reviewed a great deal of research papers. All of them showed that corrective feedback did not work.

These strong claims by (Truscott, 1996) led to different responses. Dana Ferris (1999) wrote one of the opposing papers against Truscott's claims in 1999. In her article, Ferris (1999) confronted the points proposed by Truscott. She said that there is no enough research that covers all the different contexts and longitude research to have some consistency in the results. She claimed also that Truscott overstated the research articles that supported his case and tried to ignore the ones that did not.

Several research papers were written either to confirm or to reject John Truscott's claims. Some researchers argued in favor of the effectiveness of written feedback (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995, 1997, and 1999; Ferris & Robert, 2001) and some others claimed that it is not effective ( Truscott, 2004, 2001, 2007a, 2007b, Truscott & Hsu, 2008). These raised several questions on the conflicting results and their reasons.

A good explanation for this controversy is the existence of variables beyond the researchers' control. These factors can greatly affect the outcome of the research. As Guénette (2007, p. 40) concluded:

Rather than interpret the conflicting results as a demonstration of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of corrective feedback on form, I suggest that findings can be attributed to the research design and methodology, as well as to the presence of external variables that were beyond the control and vigilance of the researchers.

It would be a good idea before starting the new approach to correcting the students' mistakes to resituate our concept of students' errors and how we view them. It has been noted that through all the research that dealt with the students' errors that the students themselves are neglected. What the writer is trying to say is that no attention was paid to the students as humans. They have feelings, needs, and emotions. The students may sometimes be very tired or hungry to an extent in which learning itself would be impossible. However, such factors did not appear in the research papers presented. Instead, more focus was given to the final product without considering these factors. It would be a good idea also to quote (Nabei & Swain, 2002) who was describing recast. They Say:

Recasting is a complex verbal behavior influenced by the teaching environment, the interaction context, and the learner's cognitive orientation. The effect of recasts is influenced not only by the linguistic elements (e.g. grammatical vs. lexical) of the feedback, but also by paralinguistic elements and the learner's autonomous utilization of the learning opportunities provided by the feedback.  
(p.1)

Here we see that there is shift of the attention from the linguistic elements themselves to the learner. Recognizing the learners themselves as important factors in giving corrective feedback may help to understand the dilemma of the contradictory results that appeared in the previous research.

Another group of researchers were more specific regarding the other factors that may affect the learning process and make Corrective Feedback effective or not (Hartshorn et al, 2010). In their article, they divided the factors that may affect the final product to three major variables. The first group of these variables is the learners' variables. What they mean here are the variables related to the learners themselves. This will include motivation of the learners, the different learning styles of each learner, what the objective of the learners are, and the interlingual effects that result from the learners' first language (or languages). The second group of variables is related to the situation. These include the teachers; their gender, teaching styles, their background... etc. The physical environment starting from the class room is it big small, visual aids .....Etc. and the socioeconomic conditions. The third group of variables is the methodological variables. This will include the instructional design, what is taught, and how is it taught.

Taking into consideration all the factors and variables described above, (Hartshorn et al, 2010) proposed a new model that takes into account all of them. They called it (Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback) or DWCF.

The DWCF model presented by the researchers (Hartshorn et al, 2010) consists of six steps. First, the student writes an assignment and hands it to the teacher. The teacher indicates the types and number of mistakes and assigns grades. The teacher then hands the assignment to the student whose job is to record his errors in a tally sheet, rewrites his or her assignment and gives it back to the teacher. The teacher then rechecks the assignments and gives it back to the student for a final revision. The last two steps are repeated until the assignment is error-free.

The researchers argue that DWCF will likely to be effective because it is meaningful, timely and consistent, and manageable. What the researchers (Hartshorn et al, 2010) mean by "meaningful" is that students should understand the feedback given to them. They suggest that the symbols used to refer to the errors should be clearly explained. If students cannot understand what the teacher means by the symbols he or she write. It would be difficult for the students to recognize the error. They suggest that the best way of giving feedback is through continue repeated feedback. For example, the students receive the feedback on their assignment the second day or class.

Manageable means that the feedback given on the students' errors should be enough for both the students and the teachers to handle. If the feedback was more than what the teacher can handle, it may affect the quality of it because the teachers will not be able to concentrate on each point. The same thing can be said for the students. If the students cannot process all the feedback given to them on their papers, they may end up neglecting it and not paying attention to the points that were treated.

(Hartshorn et al, 2010) tested their model on 47 students. These students came from different L1 backgrounds. They divided them to two groups. The first group was the control group. It did not receive the feedback. The second group was the experimental group. Results have shown that the experimental group has improved its performance greatly compared to the control group.

### **Limitations of DWCF.**

Despite of the fact that DWCF has successfully responded to some of the questions related to the effectiveness of grammatical feedback, I still think that there are obstacles that limit its effectiveness. These obstacles are related to the model's practicality and authenticity

One of the problems is the sheer amount of errors that both the teachers and students have to deal with. It is often the case that teachers have to give feedback on several errors for each assignment and for each student. Considering the fact that teachers deal often with more than one classroom, this would leave them buried in unlimited numbers of duties. The same thing can be said for the learners. Students cannot always respond to all the feedback especially if they are producing too many of grammatical errors.

In an attempt to reduce the amount of the errors that teachers have to deal with, Bitchener (2008) suggests that teachers and learners might benefit from focusing on 'one or only a few error categories' at a time (p. 108). Focusing on limited types of errors seems beneficial for both the teachers and students. It will make it easier for the teachers to give complete feedback and it will be easier for them to track their students' progress. Students will also be able to benefit from their teachers' feedback.

However, DWCF was designed to respond to "all" the grammatical errors in an attempt to make the feedback authentic. Evans, et al (2010) argue that 'in authentic writing situations, students

have to focus on multiple aspects and types of errors simultaneously' (p.453). To solve this dilemma, they limited the time and the length of the writing task. The researchers state that "The alternative approach we present limits the length of the writing task to ensure that dynamic WCF remains manageable" (p.453). This means that the students will write for a short period of time "ten minutes" and will produce a shorter piece of writing. This assignment will be manageable for the teacher to respond to.

The issue that limiting the writing time and tasks in DWCF might not be authentic as well. The researchers might have successfully reduced the amount of work that the teachers have to do. However, they did that on the expenses of the tasks' authenticity. In the real writing classroom, students are required to produce different kinds of written assignments. These assignments vary in their length. It is usual to ask students to write long essays and spend longer times producing them. It would make no sense to require the students to produce a "limited" task for assignments that are originally long and claiming that their tasks are authentic. This will bring us to the first square and will jeopardize the authenticity of DWCF

The second issue that the DWCF does not respond to is the number of the students. In all the experiments designed to test the effect of DWCF ( Hartshorn et al, 2010; Evans et al, 2010, 2011) the number of the students per teacher was small (maximum of 30 students per teacher in one of the experiments). The number might sound suitable for classrooms in the western hemisphere. However, in many ESL settings (especially in the developing countries) instructors teach several classes with more than that number mentioned in the research above in a regular basis. With such huge numbers of students, even the ten-minute assignment could become overwhelming for the teachers to give feedback on. This brings back the question of how to give a manageable yet authentic feedback to the students. A possible solution to this dilemma is through the use of Automated Essay Scoring (AES) systems.

### **Integrating AES with DWCF.**

As we have seen above, giving a timely and manageable feedback might be difficult in the real ESL environment. This will make it unsuitable to apply DWCF in the writing classroom. On the other hand, applying technology in ESL teaching and learning produced several useful tools. Among these tools are the Automated Essay Scoring (AES) systems. Automated Essay Scoring (AES) or Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) systems were developed to meet the growing needs of the skills and time necessary to respond to the students' writings (Warschauer & Ware, 2006). Several AES applications were designed and tested in different settings. (Rimrott & Trude, 2008; Felice & Pulman, 2009; Napolitano & Stent, 2009; Ebyary & Windeatt, 2010; Weigle, 2010). The results of these experiments varied from one group of students to another (Ellis & Calvo, 2010; Lai, 2010) and from one tool to another (Ebyary & Windeatt, 2010; Harbusch et al, 2009; Felice & Pulman, 2009;). The growing body of research gives us insights of the potentials of technology in the field second language writing and in ESL pedagogy in general. I propose the use of Automated Essay Scoring systems (AES) as a possible solution to this problem.

One of the points that is noticed in the research related to AES above is that these studies were conducted on the programs themselves. The researchers' main objective was to find a stand-alone program that can give feedback on the students' essays without the teachers' interference. All what the students need to do is to write an essay and upload it to the program to receive feedback

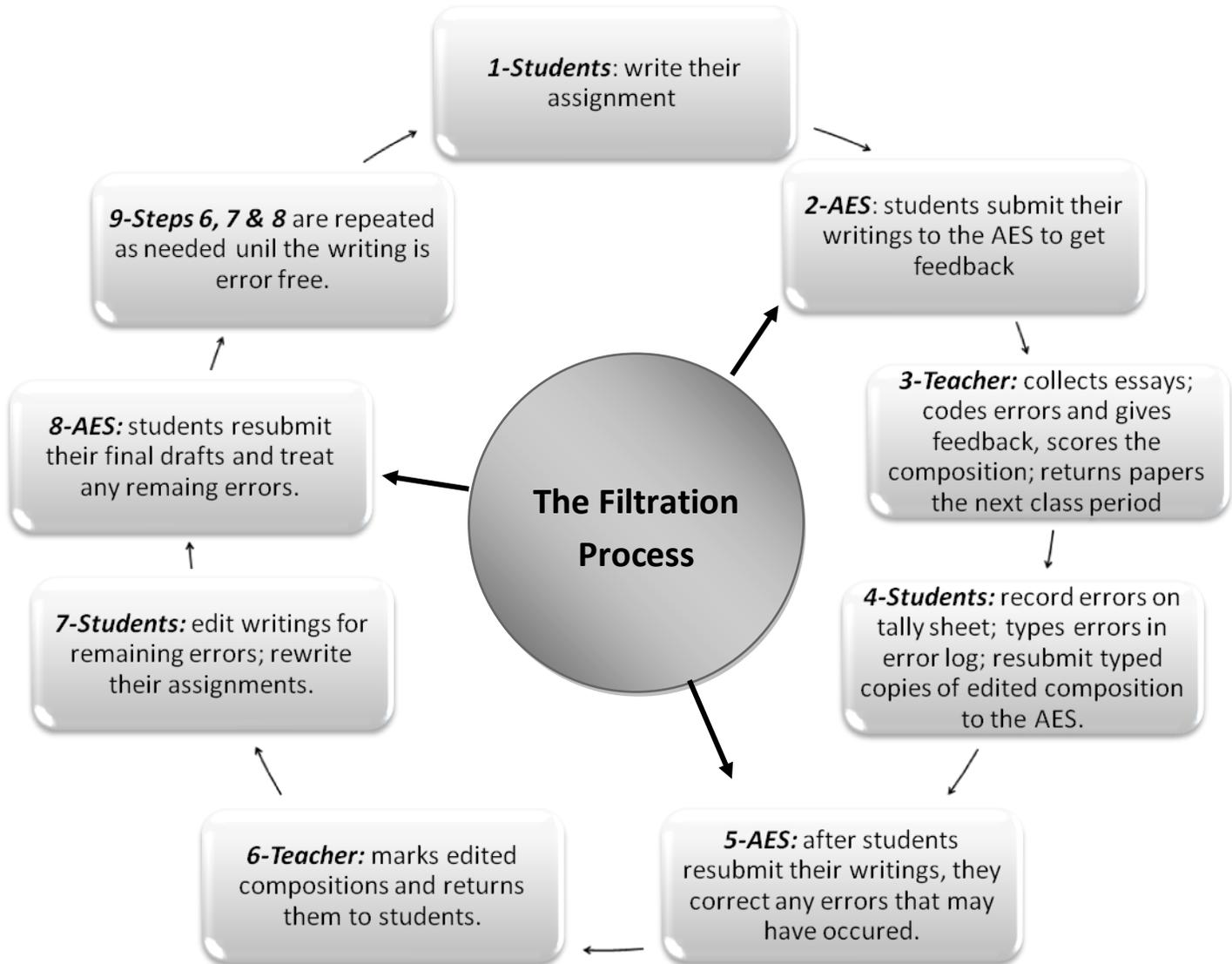
on his or errors. The research on AES above does not describe how their applications would function if they were integrated with WDCF.

I believe that integrating technology with DWCF would greatly enhance the effectiveness of the feedback given to the students and would help to overcome the problems associated with the DWCF model. The research on ASE systems showed that the results were no consistent and differed from one program to another (Ellis & Calvo, 2010; Lai, 2010; Ebyary & Windeatt, 2010; Harbusch et al, 2009; Felice & Pulman, 2009). On the other hand, the DWCF model presented by (Evans, et al, 2010) did not respond to the theoretical obstacles introduced by John Truscott in 1996. These practical problems include giving timely and manageable feedback. These shortcomings of Automated Essay Scoring Systems (i.e. inconsistent results) and the Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (i.e. time and management issues) could be solved by integrating AES systems and DWCF in one model.

The essential point in the integrated model is to exploit the strength of both DWCF and AES. Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (DWCF) produced successful results in treating the students' written errors. However, this model cannot function properly if the number of the students or the amount of the tasks is large. On the other hand, AES systems have clear advantage in dealing with larger task and student groups. Integrating both systems can lead to better results in giving feedback to the students' written assignments.

The integration process will use the AES application as a filtration system in the DWCF model. This will be conducted by asking the students to submit their written assignments to an AES system before they give them to the teacher (Figure 2). After the students submit their writing to the AES application, they will use the feedback given to them to rewrite their assignment. After that, the students will give the revised assignments to the teacher. The teacher then will provide feedback on the remaining grammatical and content errors. This process will be done every time after the students write each draft and before they submit them to their teachers.

**Figure 1: DWCF and AES integrative model (Adapted from the DWCF cycle designed by (Hartshorn et al, 2010)**



**Advantages of the integrative model.**

- 1- The integrative model can process a large amount of errors in a short time. This will allow teachers to assign long writings without worrying about the time spent in correcting them.
- 2- Because of the fast error processing capacities of this model. Teachers can deal with large number of students.

- 3- The integrative model gives individualized feedback according to each student's needs.  
 4- Using this technology will help to increase the students' motivation (Chen & Lou, 2001; Ilter, 2009; Nehme, 2010)

### Conclusion

This paper proposes a model that integrates the Automated Essay Scoring (AES) systems and the Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (DWCF) model. The paper reviews the debate over the issue of written corrective feedback and the several attempts to solve them. After that, it reviews the Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback model (DWCF). Then, the paper introduces the Automated Essay Scoring systems and proposes possible integration model.

The main objective of the integration model is to overcome the limitations of both the automated Essay Scoring systems (AES) and the Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (DWCF) model. The Automated Scoring systems works successfully in treating the grammatical errors, but it has several limitations in treating the content errors. On the other hand, the Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback model helps to improve the students' accuracy. However, this model cannot work if the assignments or the students' number is high. Integrating both systems, (I.e. AES & DWCF) could help solving this problem by creating a "filtration system." The filtration system will work by reducing the amount work the teacher has to do. This allows teachers to respond to a larger number of students without being overwhelmed by the huge numbers of papers to be corrected.

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