



## High school writing teacher feedback on word choice errors

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### Abstract

*This study scrutinizes the range and types of feedback given for word choice errors occurring in the English Taiwan Learner Corpus (ETLC), which contains Taiwanese high school students' English writings and the corrective feedback provided by L2 writing teachers. All instances of word choice error tags ( $n = 1,439$ ) were extracted from the ETLC for analyses. Results showed L2 writing teachers provided indirect feedback more often than direct feedback, requiring students to self-correct without guidance. Furthermore, many errors tagged as word choice were grammar errors, further questioning L2 writing teachers' understanding of word choice errors and competence to correct such errors. This study highlights the importance of raising students' awareness to targeted lexis prior to completing L2 writing tasks. We also argue that there are benefits for L2 writing teachers to provide focused and direct word choice error feedback after the completion of such tasks.*

**Keywords:** *Writing, Vocabulary, Corpus*

**Language(s) Learned in This Study:** *English*

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### Introduction

In second language development, writing has been viewed as the most difficult skill to master since it requires complicated mental processes, including analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Harklau, 2002; Zimmermann, 2000). Because of its complexity, second language (L2) learners ordinarily learn the skill of writing through teachers' instruction and feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hyland, 2003). Until recently, it had been hotly debated by English language teaching (ELT) researchers whether second language writing teachers should correct errors in students' L2 writing. Although previous studies have suggested that corrective feedback may be ineffective and should be abandoned (Loewen et al., 2009; Truscott, 1996), more recently researchers have argued that students still need teachers' feedback to improve writing accuracy (Kao et al., 2019). While the question of whether to correct students' L2 writing errors has been given less attention in recent years, arguably more pertinent questions such as *how to correct students errors* and *what type of teacher feedback should be provided* have started to gain more attention (see Truscott & Hsu 2008 for an alternative view). Another question posed, for example, is whether written corrective feedback provided by L2 writing teachers should be *direct*, in which teachers provide learners the corrected forms, or should be *indirect*, in which teachers provide an indication of errors for learners to correct themselves. Another question posed by ELT researchers is whether the feedback should be *focused*, where L2 writing teachers provide feedback for a small number of error types, or *unfocused*, where teachers correct all error types. While more nuanced questions are being asked about the types of feedback L2 writing teachers should be providing for students' writing errors, almost all of the discussion has centered on grammatical rule-based errors. However, from the viewpoint of treatability, lexically based errors in word choice have been considered untreatable because they are normally idiosyncratic and have no systematic rule for learners to consult (Ferris, 1999). Such lexically based errors as word choice errors

constitute idiosyncratic conventions of how a specific lexical item or combination behaves, for example the choice of prepositions in *pay attention to* and *focus attention on*. Furthermore, students' lexical proficiency has been found to contribute substantially to their writing performance. Research has pointed out that lexical choices, to some extent, significantly positively correlated with students' second language writing quality (Crossley & McNamara, 2009; Engber, 1995). Although lexically based errors differ greatly from grammatical rule-based errors, the two different error types are normally conflated to investigate the effects of correction on language accuracy (Chandler, 2003). Currently, there is little research being done to help inform L2 writing teachers on how and if they should correct and provide feedback exclusively for *word choice* errors. Since the effectiveness of teacher feedback might depend on the feedback content, it is worthwhile conducting a study to analyze the content of L2 writing teachers' feedback given for word choice errors appearing in students' L2 writing. Results gained from such an investigation will provide insights allowing for the formulation of guidelines to provide more effective L2 writing teacher feedback. It was exactly with these thoughts in mind that the current study was initiated.

How to use words appropriately in L2 writing is important but difficult for students to master. Choosing appropriate words is difficult because decisions are often based on L1 knowledge which is often partially or completely contradictory to the L2 (Chen, 2002). When wrong choices are made, resulting in word choice errors, it is often the L2 writing teacher's responsibility to administer corrective feedback; however, some research has shown that students receiving corrective feedback are not successful in correcting the errors in their revisions (Ferris & Roberts 2001). Nonetheless, this result might not be because the word choice errors cannot or should not be corrected by L2 writing teachers. Instead, ineffectiveness might come from the feedback provided by the L2 writing teachers. Students might not understand teachers' feedback well enough and fail to make revisions even if teachers provide a large amount of feedback for students to consult. Hence, it is necessary to understand what feedback is provided for students' L2 word choice errors before making claims about the effectiveness of word choice feedback.

With the advancement of technology, it has become very common for students to produce L2 writing on computers and for L2 writing teachers to provide feedback for the writing through the internet (Chen, Cheng & Yang, 2017). The changes in how students write in the L2 and how L2 writing teachers provide feedback have afforded ELT researchers opportunities to easily obtain abundant data from these authentic teacher and student interactions to gain a more comprehensive picture of teacher feedback. Nonetheless, few ELT researchers have looked closely into the content of the feedback provided by L2 writing teachers through the internet (e.g. Chen, Cheng & Yang, 2017; Chen, Chiu & Liao, 2009). Thus, the current study intended to scrutinize L2 writing teachers' feedback given through an online writing platform (Wible et al., 2001) to address students' L2 writing word choice errors. Furthermore, the purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of feedback were given by L2 writing teachers to correct students' word choice errors?
2. What specific errors were highlighted by L2 writing teachers as word choice errors?

## Methods

### Corpus Data

518 Taiwanese high school students' L2 writings and their L2 writing teachers' feedback on word choice errors from the English Taiwan Learner Corpus (ETLC) were collected for one academic year and were the source for data extraction. The different low-stakes writing assignments that elicited the students' writing (description/narration and exposition/argumentation) were designed by high school L2 writing teachers from five schools in northern Taiwan. It was at the writing teachers' discretion to set the time limit for the writing assignments. Revision of multiple drafts was encouraged through the platform. After students and teachers obtain access to the platform, they are requested to sign consent forms agreeing to have their interactions on the platform used for research purposes. Students' L2 writing and their L2 writing teachers' feedback are automatically compiled in the ETLC. Researchers can scrutinize the comments made by the

L2 writing teachers to examine the content of the feedback given (see Figure 1). The platform does not place any constraints on feedback tags or the comments associated with the tags.

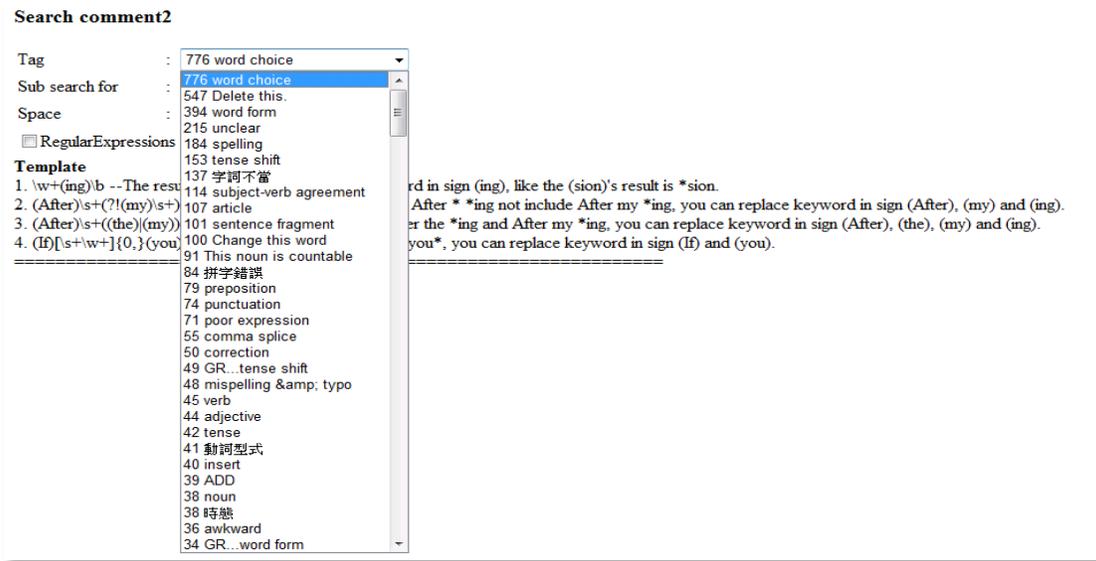


Figure 1. Sample list of teacher feedback tags.

After selecting a feedback tag, researchers can view all sentences in the corpus with that particular tag. The output given by the corpus includes both the errors highlighted in a red font as well as the L2 writing teacher feedback for the errors (see Figure 2). In addition, the essays containing the errors can also be accessed (see Figure 3).

word choice			
Student ID : <a href="#">srv1_fuhsing_6350275_6189</a>			
NO.	Sentence	Tag & Comment	Essay
1	I'm <b>happy so much!</b>	word choice This is not the right word here. Use a different word.	<a href="#">Essay</a>
Student ID : <a href="#">srv1_fuhsing_7300248_4574</a>			
NO.	Sentence	Tag & Comment	Essay
2	We meet a teacher that he was seriously <b>in</b> that day.	word choice This is not the right word here. Use a different word.	<a href="#">Essay</a>
Student ID : <a href="#">srv1_fuhsing_7300249_4575</a>			
NO.	Sentence	Tag & Comment	Essay
3	<b>At</b> the weekend.	word choice This is not the right word here. Use a different word.	<a href="#">Essay</a>
Student ID : <a href="#">srv1_fuhsing_7300337_4577</a>			
NO.	Sentence	Tag & Comment	Essay
4	I <b>wish</b> I can learn English well.	word choice This is not the right word here. Use a different word.	<a href="#">Essay</a>
Student ID : <a href="#">srv1_fuhsing_7350532_3157</a>			
NO.	Sentence	Tag & Comment	Essay

Figure 2. Sentences tagged as containing word choice errors with L2 writing teacher feedback.

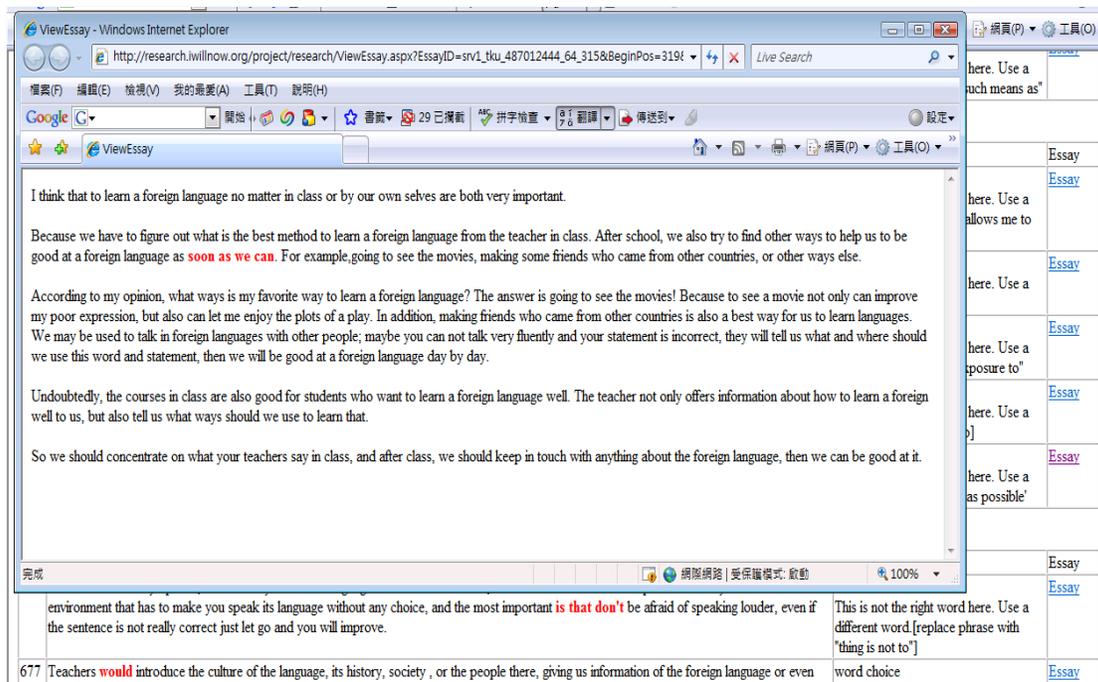


Figure 3. Sample student essay with highlighted error.

### Feedback Analyses and Results

L2 writing teachers' feedback on students' word choice errors were extracted and the frequency of tags calculated. A total of 1,439 instances of word choice error feedback was extracted. L2 writing teachers tagged word choice errors using nine different feedback tags (see Table 1).

Table 1. L2 Writing Teachers' Feedback on Word Choice Errors

Feedback Tag	Frequency
Word choice	776
Word form	394
字詞不當 <sup>a</sup>	134
Change this word	103
Improper usage or words	20
Wrong word	6
Wrong form	4
Wrong words	1
Word use	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,439</b>

<sup>a</sup>A translation for the Chinese is "Improper word"

The concepts of *direct* and *indirect* feedback were used to answer research question 1: What types of feedback were given by L2 writing teachers to correct students' word choice errors? According to Ferris and Roberts (2001), direct feedback is when L2 writing teachers provide the correct form for a student's L2 writing error, while indirect feedback is when L2 writing teachers indicate an error has been made in a

student's L2 writing but without giving the correct form. We first examined the content of the feedback given by L2 writing teachers to categorize and code the feedback into two types: direct and indirect. The first author and a research assistant independently completed the coding, and any disagreements were resolved with a discussion with the second author. Next, a one-way goodness-of-fit chi-square was conducted to see whether L2 writing teachers were choosing to provide the two types of feedback (direct and indirect) equally. The result indicated that L2 writing teachers chose to provide indirect feedback more frequently than direct feedback for students' L2 writing word choice errors (see Table 2). After this, the first author and the research assistant independently examined the content of the two types of feedback (direct and indirect) using qualitative pattern coding (Miles et al., 2014) to divide the feedback into several feedback sub-types. Next, a one-way goodness-of-fit chi-square was conducted to see whether L2 writing teachers were choosing to provide feedback sub-types equally. The result indicated that when L2 writing teachers chose to provide indirect feedback, they most frequently required the use of a different word, and when L2 writing teachers chose to provide direct feedback, they most frequently provided a suggestion of an appropriate word (see Table 3 and Table 4).

**Table 2.** *Comparison Between Direct and Indirect Feedback Types*

Feedback Types	N Obs	N Expected	Chi-Square
Indirect	999	719.5	217.151***
Direct	440	719.5	

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

**Table 3.** *Indirect Feedback Sub-Types*

Sub-types	Examples	N Obs	N Expected	Chi-square
Demanded the use of a different word(s)	"This is not the right word here. Use a different word."	890	249.8	2193.885**
Suggested to select another word(s) with the same part-of-speech	"This is not the right word here. Use a different preposition."	61	249.8	
Questioned the intended meaning or questioned the grammatical form(s) that should have been used	"We don't 'do contributions'. What verb goes here instead of 'do'?"	9	249.8	
Explained or reminded why the word(s) was not appropriate	"I'm not sure I see the logical 'therefore' connection between the idea before and after the 'therefore' here. Either give more detail before 'therefore' or use another transition word."	39	249.8	

\*\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 4. Direct Feedback Sub-Types

Sub-types	Examples	N Obs	N Expected	Chi-square
Provided a suggestion of an appropriate word(s)	“This is not the right word here. Use 'no' here.”	389	146.7	600.605**
Provided a suggestion of an appropriate word(s) with an explanation(s) or example(s)	“Maybe ‘found’ or ‘received’ is better than ‘had’ here because 'had' is a STATE but you may want to express not a state but something that happened.”	25	146.7	
Provided options and left it to the writer to decide which word(s) is appropriate	“This is not the right word here. Chinese ‘Yao Qiu’ would be something like 'require' 'expect' or 'demand', but not 'ask'.”	26	146.7	

\*\*  $p \leq .01$

To answer research question 2—*What specific errors were highlighted by L2 writing teachers as word choice errors?*—qualitative pattern coding was again used following the same coding procedure to categorize and code errors highlighted by L2 writing teachers. The coding of the errors revealed five error types (see Table 5). It was found that most errors tagged by L2 writing teachers as word choice errors were made by students due to lexical, grammatical, and multi-word expression errors. Other errors tagged as word choice errors included misspellings and misuse of syntax.

Table 5. Students’ “Word Choice” Errors Highlighted by Teachers Categorized by Error Types

Error Types	N Obs	Examples
Misspellings	44	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“If I hope my English <u>tecomes</u> good, I must have interest in it.”</li> <li>“If you work <u>witch</u> a computer, your work will be finished quickly.”</li> </ul>
Grammar Errors	384	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“There <u>has</u> bananas, apples, peaches, etc.”</li> <li>“I learned so <u>much</u> different things at his class.”</li> </ul>
Multi-word Expression Errors	469	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“<u>From now</u>, we ought to remind ourselves and other people to be careful of public property.”</li> <li>“<u>At the last</u>, the department looks like nothing happened.”</li> </ul>
Lexical Errors	524	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Although he has such <u>disadvantages</u>, he is still my father.”</li> <li>“So, to take protection measures <u>previously</u> can stop the misfortune from happening or reduce the damage.”</li> </ul>
Syntax Errors	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“<u>By the time my purse my friend holding appeared on front of my sight.</u>”</li> <li>“<u>Only I can do is studying and studying.</u>”</li> </ul>

Note. Underlined words represent highlights by L2 teachers and tagged as a word choice error.

## Discussion & Implications

Research shows word choice errors are more easily identifiable by humans than computer-generated feedback software (Chen, Cheng and Yang 2017). However, little research has been conducted to investigate the quality and content of the feedback provided by human raters. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study reveals a more comprehensive picture of the feedback given by high school L2 writing teachers in Taiwan.

### Directness in Feedback on Word Choice Errors

The current study found that L2 writing teachers tended to use indirect feedback more frequently than direct feedback for students' word choice errors. Examining the indirect feedback sub-types found L2 writing teachers normally asked students to use different words without offering any explanations or examples. L2 writing teachers might perceive word choice errors as not being a particularly serious hindrance to students' L2 writing and may expect students to have the wherewithal to correct their own errors without much assistance. L2 writing teachers, ELT researchers, and students may vary in their views about which lexical errors require awareness raising and which lexical errors learners can detect and are willing to self-correct. Thus, we recommend that L2 writing teachers rethink such attitudes towards feedback of word choice errors. Reynolds (2016), for example, found students resistant to self-editing and self-correction of verb-noun collocation errors—instead expressing negative feelings about the L2 writing teacher's suggestion for them to independently address collocation errors by referencing an online bilingual concordancer. While several on-line linguistic corpus tools (e.g. [British National Corpus](#), [StringNet Navigator](#), etc.) have been developed to promote students' language awareness and provide user-friendly access to corpora, some students may still need guidance in using such tools. L2 writing teachers are suggested to clearly explain to students why developing self-editing and referencing skills is necessary—this ensures appropriate words have been selected so that their intended messages are relayed. Thus, the first recommendation based on the results of the current study is that L2 writing teachers should provide instructional intervention that encourages self-editing of word choice errors that takes place during the completion of writing tasks meaningful for L2 learners.

The current study found L2 writing teachers were less inclined to offer direct feedback for students' word choice errors. While the online writing platform linked to the ETLC used by the L2 writing teachers afforded the ability to quickly apply specific and tailored error tags to predictable grammatical rule-based errors, this may not have been a viable option for word choice errors due to their idiomatic and unpredictable nature. Thus, it is possible that L2 writing teachers could not decide on the fly which appropriate word(s) should be provided and instead left it up to students to figure out. We must also keep in mind that the L2 writing teachers were providing comprehensive, unfocused feedback, meaning they provided feedback for all errors found in students' L2 writing. Giving unfocused all-encompassing feedback for diversified errors might result in students' failure in successfully correcting their L2 writing errors because students might minimally notice word choice error feedback among all the comprehensive unfocused feedback (Fazio 2001). The L2 writing grammar feedback literature has already shown that focused feedback, where only a select number of error types are corrected, is more effective in reducing the number of errors in students' subsequent writings (Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen, 2007). As with grammar errors, word choice errors should be categorized and targeted for feedback by L2 writing teachers. According to Ammar and Spada (2006, p. 566), it is impossible to use one-size-fits-all feedback to address errors made by L2 writers. The same principle can also be applied to the feedback provided by L2 writing teachers for different word choice errors. For example, some of the word choice errors made by the L2 writers were due to the use of a word that does not exist (e.g., *\*nonintelligible* for *unintelligible*). This result shows that, in L2 writing, it is common for students to misuse a word because they meant something different or the word sounds similar to the word that the learners actually wanted to use (Laufer 1988). This highlights a need for pre- and in-service teacher training on how to provide feedback on confusable words and how these word choice errors are different than those that are made due to, for example, miscolllocations (e.g., *\*eat medicine* for *take medicine*). Thus, the second recommendation based on the results of the current

study is that for each writing task, L2 writing teachers should provide direct feedback that is focused on a selective number of word choice error types. The benefits of administering feedback in this manner could be retained in delayed writing tasks (Reynolds, 2016). In addition, a more conservative implication is that teachers should be aware of the kind of feedback they are providing and should try to match it to their pedagogical purposes and to students' goals. In that way, the feedback given could be contextualized in writing tasks.

Ferris and Roberts (2001) divided errors into treatable and untreatable ones, claiming word choice errors were untreatable because there are no rules for consultation. On the other hand, Truscott (2001) categorized errors from low-correctability to high-correctability, claiming some word choice errors can be discretely viewed and thereby correctable. Here, it can be inferred that researchers' viewpoints toward the correctability of word choice errors are complicated and also multifaceted. It has been pointed out that the acquisition of language knowledge involving lexis or word choice requires students' awareness (Huang et al., 2012). When correcting and providing feedback on students' word choice errors, L2 writing teachers should notice whether the error feedback content is informative enough to raise students' awareness. Since no rule can be consulted for students to correct word choice errors, the feedback content which encourages students' linguistic awareness could serve as meaningful language input contributing to students' overall L2 development. Thus, the third recommendation based on the results of the current study is L2 writing teachers should direct feedback in conjunction with meta-linguistic feedback that provides an explanation of type(s) of word choice error(s) that have been targeted for feedback and correction.

### **Highlighted Word Choice Errors**

The current study found that the word choice errors highlighted by the L2 writing teachers were unsystematic, ranging from misspellings to syntax errors. This finding points out that the L2 writing teachers normally misjudged errors as being word choice errors (915 out of 1439 instances) when they actually involved more sentence-level errors, multi-word expression errors, and misspellings. Teacher feedback that is unclear and unorganized will result in student writers not being able to understand the feedback (Hyland 1998). Nevertheless, students need teachers' feedback to revise and aid their future writing (Ferris and Roberts 2001). This conflict could be one of the main reasons students sometimes continue to make the same word choice errors in subsequent writings even after receiving teacher feedback. It can be inferred from the results of the current study that teachers' feedback cannot always effectively address students' word choice errors. However, it is unreasonable to claim that all teacher feedback is unhelpful in addressing students' word choice errors simply due to the poor quality of particular teacher feedback. Some L2 writing teachers' knowledge regarding giving error feedback is insufficient. Hence, workshops to help L2 writing teachers give proper focused, direct feedback to address students' word choice errors are called for. ELT researchers and practitioners should discuss the problems they face together and brainstorm how to improve the quality of feedback content. Thus, the fourth recommendation based on the results of the current study is that L2 writing teachers should become well-informed about the error types they are targeting so that they may provide appropriate and accurate feedback to students.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

We outline how a L2 writing teacher can help students practice and improve word choice accuracy through a communicative guided picture composition task that can purposefully elicit vocabulary usage (Nation, 2009). First, the L2 writing teacher selects the type(s) of word choice errors to target for the task. In this example, the teacher selects verb-noun collocations because they occur at a high frequency in English and cause many problems for students (Laufer & Waldman, 2011). Next, the teacher provides the students with a picture or a series of pictures, each with question(s) about the picture(s) written below. The students answer these questions with or without a peer and then use the answers to write a narrative, descriptive, or reflective composition. Since the task is more focused than an open-ended writing prompt, the L2 writing teacher will be more prepared for the word choice errors that are likely to occur in students' writing. For example, the sample pictures from Muranoi (2000) in [Figure 4](#) aim to elicit the target collocations "paint painting," "take walk," "express opinion," "swing bat," "get hurt," and "hold bat" for a narrative essay.

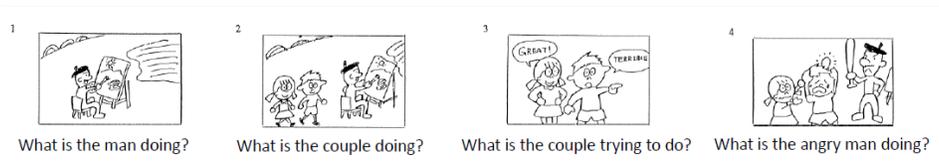


Figure 4. Sample pictures to elicit target collocations.

After the compositions are completed, since verb-noun collocations were targeted in the current example, the L2 writing teacher would provide focused feedback for verb-noun collocations that is direct. Just prior to returning compositions to students, the L2 writing teacher provides instruction on the concept of collocation and the importance of collocation accuracy—this instruction can also include several examples of correct verb-noun collocations that were not targeted in this task. L2 writing teachers can choose targeted collocations for the picture(s) and the post-task instruction by referencing any collocation dictionary published by major publishing houses. As students get more familiar with the task, teachers can slowly scaffold students to encourage self-correction of word choice errors. This will be done through gradually providing direct feedback on an increasingly smaller percentage of errors while still highlighting the remaining errors but without providing the corrected forms. Students then self-correct the remaining errors via guidance from corpus tools such as the [Contemporary Corpus of American English](#), Tom Cobb’s [The Compleat Lexical Tutor](#), or [TANGO](#), to name but a few. If there are time constraints, the self-correction portion of the task can be completed outside the classroom and the L2 writing teacher can quickly assess whether highlighted errors have been accurately self-corrected. We believe this and similar L2 writing tasks can increase the positive effect of feedback provided by L2 writing teachers while also simultaneously encouraging sensitivity to self-correct word choice errors and learner autonomy.

## Conclusion

As with most corpus-based studies, the current study is limited in that the student word choice errors and the teacher feedback data were collected from a number of different student essays written by learners with varying L2 abilities. Furthermore, since a number of different teachers from the 5 schools in northern Taiwan provided corrective feedback on students’ essays, the current study can only provide a general picture of the errors and feedback for those individuals that opted to participate and were willing to use the online writing platform. While it was never the current study’s aim to measure the effect of different types of corrective feedback on word choice errors, we believe that this study does highlight the need for future empirical studies to be conducted to answer questions about how effective different types of L2 writing teacher corrective feedback are in “treating” different word choice error types.

In conclusion, the current study found L2 writing teachers were less likely to provide direct feedback for word choice errors in the online writing platform and mislabeled several errors as word choice errors. This might be because writing teachers are always bombarded with different types of errors elicited from poorly designed writing tasks and do not have sufficient time to look closely into what exact types of errors have been made. We suggest that L2 writing teachers at least provide feedback on word choice errors that is focused and direct and if possible, should integrate their corrective feedback on word choice errors within writing tasks that are communicative and purposefully elicit targeted lexical usage. We also feel future designers of online writing platforms can follow these suggestions for teacher feedback to facilitate improved word choice in students’ L2 writing.

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