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This article introduces the idea of grammar agreements as a way to offer a more "finely tuned approach" to grammar feedback in the L2 classroom (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, p. 307). These agreements offer students options for how the teacher will respond to writing done in their first-year composition classes. The authors offer suggestions for both why grammar agreements are a useful tool in the L2 writing classroom (and possibly beyond) and how to implement grammar agreements effectively.

Keywords: L2 writing, second-language writing, grammar, grammar feedback, corrective feedback

How to approach grammar in the second-language (L2) writing classroom can be a complex and often frustrating issue for students, teachers, and researchers. L2 writing students taking their first composition class often feel that they should be getting grammar feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003; Bitchener & Ferris, 2003) but may feel overwhelmed, confused, or frustrated by their teachers' feedback styles and prioritizations (Ferris, 2003). Teachers also feel like they should be giving students this feedback (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) but may feel overwhelmed, confused, or frustrated by diverse student expectations and ability levels. Still, teachers have an ethical obligation "to identify the most effective ways to help [their] students write more accurately" (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum & Wolfersberger, 2010, p. 448). We, as teachers and researchers of L2 writing, believe that teachers should test new methods to refine feedback given to L2 writing students. We need to develop innovative approaches to provide more effective feedback for the students that is also a more efficient use of our time. This article seeks to offer one such alternative for feedback: grammar agreements. These agreements offer students choices of how they would prefer to receive feedback on grammar and mechanical errors in their writing. In this study, we explore the limitations and potential benefits of using grammar agreements in order to "take a more finely tuned approach to corrective feedback" (Ferris, Liu, Sinha & Senna, 2013, p. 307).

Background

Grammar agreements bring students into the decision-making process instead of simply giving students a predetermined amount of feedback on assignments. In the model we have used for this study, students were able to choose from three levels of grammar feedback that involve varying levels of commitment from the teacher as well as the student (see Appendix). These three levels were called "extensive," "focused," and "minimal" feedback. If a student chose extensive feedback, the teacher would make note of most grammatical errors in the student's papers in whatever way he or she saw fit. The student would then be expected to correct the errors and meet with the teacher to discuss them outside of class time. If a student chose focused

feedback, the teacher would mark one to three serious or repeated errors in each paper. The student would then be expected to correct these errors, but meeting outside of class time would be optional. If a student chose minimal feedback, the teacher would only mark grammatical errors if the meaning was unclear. There were no additional expectations in regard to grammar if this option was chosen.

The grammar agreements are set up to be in line with what research suggests for written corrective feedback in L2 writing classes. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) note that students "should be responsible and accountable for editing their work and improving in accuracy over time" (p. 163), a sentiment that initially led to the development of this method.

Grammar agreements are attempting to address several issues that commonly result from providing explicit grammar instruction in composition classes. Part of what makes the grammar agreements appealing is that grammar is not graded, but students who choose to get grammar feedback are still held accountable for improvement. This concept draws from suggestions put forth by Matsuda (2012), who called into question the logic of grading grammar for L2 students in first-year composition without teaching grammar explicitly. Grammar agreements are able to sidestep this issue while still keeping grammar part of the class. There is also the question of how effective grammar feedback is for students in the short- and long-term. For example, the literature questions the effectiveness of direct grammar instruction (Chandler, 2003; Lee, 2003; Truscott & Hsu, 2008; Ferris et al., 2013). The grammar agreements were set up to take an indirect approach to grammar feedback, or possibly a mix of direct and indirect feedback, to "better address the goals" of a writing class (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

By allowing students to select how much feedback they receive, teachers are able to bring students into the conversation regarding how much feedback will meet their needs. While composition research—at least L1 composition research—may lead us to believe grammar is not part of the composition class, Bitchener and Ferris (2012) remind us that "both students and instructors believe in written CF [corrective feedback]" (p. 96). By allowing students to choose their level of involvement, we also give them some agency in the classroom. Ferris (2003) notes the importance

of having open communication lines between teachers and students with regard to overall feedback practices, as it "helps [teachers] to be aware of what [their] students may think and how they may react to [their] pedagogical practices" (p. 93). Students are able to see what options are available to them in the grammar agreements and are able to choose how they would like grammar to be approached in their papers after thoughtful discussion with the teacher about the pros and cons of each option. This also enables students and teachers to have a more dialogical relationship about pedagogical practices and expectations.

The Study

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of grammar agreements, we set up a study to see how they were used in L2 writing classrooms. Fourteen teachers at a large Southwestern research institution used grammar agreements in their classes in the fall of 2013. All of the sections were first-year composition, and each section was designated specifically for L2 writers. In total, 279 students took part in the study, and nearly 600 samples of student writing were taken. Each text was reviewed for number of grammar errors, number of mechanical errors, and overall writing quality by a minimum of two reviewers. A third reviewer was consulted to resolve scoring disputes. At the end of the semester, students and instructors were asked to participate in surveys to gauge their perceptions of the grammar agreements. Offering the teachers' views on the use of grammar agreements is a perspective that Ferris (2003) notes is relatively absent in previous literature.

Students showed general improvement in grammar errors, mechanical errors, and overall writing regardless of whether they chose extensive, focused, or minimal feedback. Analysis of the student writing samples showed that there was no statistically significant difference between students in each feedback category (Table 1) in terms of improvement in these areas.

While the type of feedback did not show a marked difference in improvement, the study did yield two notable impressions in other areas: students are interested in receiving grammar feedback, and teachers

Table 1
Overview of Improvement

	Extensive	Focused	Minimal
Percentage showing improvement (writing)	70.45%	75.56%	60.00%
Percentage showing improvement (grammar)	70.33%	62.22%	66.67%
Percentage showing improvement (mechanics)	52.27%	64.44%	46.67%
Average improvement (writing)[i]	1.91	1.50	0.86
Average improvement (grammar)[ii]	1.98	0.39	1.23
Average improvement (mechanics)	0.33	1.08	0.34
Number of errors per 100 words: pretest (grammar)	8.35	7.00	7.36
Number of errors per 100 words: posttest (grammar)	6.38	6.60	6.12
Number of errors per 100 words: pretest (mechanics)	3.17	3.60	2.30
Number of errors per 100 words: posttest (mechanics)	2.85	2.52	1.96

[i] Based on a comparison of 20-point scores of pretest vs. posttest.

[ii] Based on comparison of errors per 100 words in pretest vs. posttest.

generally appreciated grammar agreements but wanted to modify them to their contexts and needs.

Student Interest in Grammar Feedback

Of the 279 students who took part in this study, 132 chose extensive feedback and 129 chose focused feedback. That leaves 18 who chose minimal feedback, only about 6.5% of the students. While 6.5% is certainly significant and shows that some students are not interested in grammar feedback, it also suggests that the vast majority of students in these L2 writing classes were interested in receiving some kind of feedback. This is consistent with other research in the area (e.g., Chandler, 2003). While not all students wanted that kind of extensive feedback, a majority did, and a vast majority wanted some kind of feedback. As shown above, more feedback did not necessarily translate directly into more improvement in writing, grammar, or mechanics, but many students were still interested in, and likely expected, this type of feedback.

This finding is supported by the exit survey. A question on the survey asked students "What was/were the most important factors in your choice" of type of feedback? "Learning grammar" (61.4%) and their "grades" (62.7%) were the two answers which students were most likely to mark as "very important" to their choice. Students also rated as "very important" the "amount of work" (44.1%) and "amount of time" (44.0%) they expected to spend revising grammar. Students were also

able to write in answers to this question. While relatively few students wrote in answers (just 7 out of the 70 who responded to the exit survey), their answers were telling. One student said that he or she wanted to "enhance [his/her] ability in English writing" and that he or she hoped "to improve [his/her] English comprehensively." Another student said, "I like to know what I did wrong rather than blindly repeating the same mistakes again." Three other students also mentioned wanting to learn more about English or grammar.

While it is not necessarily clear how much students can learn from the different types of feedback over the course of 16 weeks (e.g., Truscott, 1996), it's clear that students perceived that the feedback would help them learn. Denying these students the opportunity to continue to work on their grammar and mechanics in our writing class would be a mistake. If grammar were to be ignored, students may be unhappy with the class and may feel that they are not doing enough to improve their English skills along with their writing skills. Ferris (2003) corroborates this idea, saying that "ignoring students' wishes about error feedback may lead to frustration [. . .], anxiety, decreased motivation, and a corresponding loss of confidence in their writing instructors" (p. 141). Imposing a single track of grammar feedback (extensive or focused, for example) may also leave more than half of the students unsatisfied with the feedback they were receiving.

Teacher Perspectives on Grammar Agreements

After a semester of using grammar agreements, participating teachers were asked to take a perception survey on the efficacy of using this tool in an L2 writing course. The results were mixed. Five out of eight teachers indicated that they were "satisfied overall with the benefits" that grammar agreements afforded in their classes, one citing that the agreements gave students more agency to ask for grammar feedback. Another teacher wrote that "Students appreciated having the ability to request more one-on-one time with their instructor." Two of the three teachers who were not satisfied with the agreements felt that they had other strategies that accomplished the same goals, one stating that "I do appreciate what [the agreement is] trying to accomplish, and I use other methods to do similar things." Another teacher noted that she did not continue using the

grammar agreements while also ceding that "that does not mean I won't use something similar in the future." The teachers' reasons for their opinions were often linked to students' individual needs: "I found that it did help some students, but individuals who needed the most help were not always the ones who signed up for it." Others based their impressions on how much time they had to dedicate to giving feedback. One teacher asserted that the agreements "didn't necessarily help manage my time," adding that the agreements increased her workload. Perhaps the most insightful comment from a participating teacher reflects the overall purposes of offering students agency and choice in their feedback from teachers. Her comment offers possible revisions to the current options:

> I think that the students like when they have a choice regarding their learning and that some sort of [agreement] is a good way to provide that. I am not sure if students need the option "extensive" though. We know that focused feedback is probably more effective for students' learning and I am thinking of modifying the [agreement], so that the first choice is eliminated but the second one (focused feedback) comes with the required conference. I also vary my feedback instead of only providing indirect feedback by locating the error; I vary it depending on the type of error, as I can sometimes tell that the student would not be able to self-correct the error. What I feel is more important is to make [students] think about the correction that is provided and try to see why the error occurred, so they can spend the time on internalizing the correct language instead of spending that time searching for the correction.

This mix of direct and indirect feedback is also recommended by Bitchener and Ferris (2012). It is interesting to note that one of the researchers of this study independently came to a similar conclusion: he also eliminated the "extensive feedback" option in later semesters and moved the conference requirement to those students who selected "focused feedback." Perhaps modifying the grammar agreement would offer more effective feedback for students and would overcome the problem of the work required for teachers to respond to the "extensive" option. Both the researcher and this instructor seem to be agreeing with Bitchener and Ferris (2012)

that selective feedback may be more effective in the context of a process-oriented first-year composition course (p. 144).

Two main conclusions can also be drawn from the results of the teacher perception survey. The first is that both teachers and students need to fully understand the parameters and expectations of the grammar agreements for them to be successful. One teacher noted that the start of the semester is already packed with new and potentially complicated information for English-language learners, and so instituting the grammar agreements amid other start-of-semester announcements was "confusing." She noted her students' uncertainty with the choices. This uncertainty persisted throughout the semester: "Even though I would remind students when I commented on their drafts that some would receive intensive responses while others would receive global remarks, in the end the majority of them wanted grammar feedback even if they did not agree to this option from the onset." Another teacher noticed, "when students are asked to make their choice, they may not necessarily be able to understand what the choices really mean for them in the long term or for their language learning in general." A third teacher attributed any ineffectiveness of the grammar agreements to his own inadequate explanation of the tool that he provided to his students, stating that if given the opportunity to do it again, he would rework the way he explained the agreements to alleviate confusion. These statements reiterate the importance of clearly explaining the agreements and bringing students into the decision-making process.

A second conclusion is that for grammar agreements to be beneficial for L2 writing teachers, these teachers should implement the agreements in a way that complements their individual teaching styles, practices, and pedagogies. As one teacher noted, "Students appreciated [the grammar agreements] overall. However, I find tailoring conferences and other office visits to students' needs more convenient." In another case, the teacher chose not to use the grammar agreements in future classes because, "it just isn't as effective for me as I feel my own strategy is." As with any new tool or innovation proposed for the classroom, its success depends on how well it aligns with the needs of the users.

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Recommendations

Although the grammar agreements as used in the study worked well, we would make a few modifications in future grammar agreements with regard to improving student and teacher satisfaction. In particular, the option to offer extensive feedback may need to be adjusted or eliminated in specific contexts. As a few of the teachers who took part in the study mentioned, this feedback choice was very time-consuming. It may even be counterproductive: "If a teacher focuses too much on errors when the content is still being formulated, it sends the wrong message to students—they get the idea that writing is more about pristine final products than it is about engaging in the process to produce interesting and mature content" (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, p. 141). Perhaps eliminating this option or replacing it with a more manageable option would help to reduce the time necessary to offer students feedback and may avoid sending this wrong message. If the extensive feedback option is desired by the student, one alternative may be to create an option in which teachers mark four to six repeated or serious errors. This may be a bit more manageable while still offering students an option beyond focused and minimal feedback. If the extensive feedback option is removed entirely, we do recommend adding the grammar conference requirement to the focused feedback option as a means of providing more feedback for students who desire it.

Teachers who may want to implement this strategy in the future may try to create an escalating ladder of agreement choices for students with the policy that the more feedback the teacher gives, the more required work (e.g., revisions, explanations, grammar logs, exercises, face-to-face meetings) the student must complete to utilize that feedback. Teachers are welcome to use previously studied and innovative strategies that promote explicit grammar knowledge and production. Although many students will not choose the highest levels of this type of grammar agreement, we feel that offering this option allows for fruitful discussions of grammar feedback theory between teachers and those students who have a strong desire for extensive grammar feedback.

We also recommend a combination of indirect and direct response to grammar feedback. This was suggested by one of the teacher participants

in the study and is further supported by the recommendations of Bitchener and Ferris (2012). As the teacher says, "I can sometimes tell that the student would not be able to self-correct the error." An experienced and intuitive teacher may be able to make such an observation, and in that case, a more direct approach would be more effective for certain errors. We would like to note that each of the researchers of this study use this approach as well. Teachers have many choices involved in the feedback practices they employ with second-language writing students; Ferris (2003) notes:

> Considerations include the knowledge, abilities, needs, and preferences of the students, the types of errors being considered, the stage of development of a particular text, and the time, ability, and willingness of the instructor to incorporate error treatment (including feedback, revision, and instruction) into the overall plan of the writing course. (p. 157)

Each context is different, and ultimately it is up to each individual teacher to decide the precise combination of feedback techniques that are beneficial for the student and reasonable for the teacher. It is these choices that Ferris (2003) says have the potential to have a "profound effect on the progress and development of . . . students' writing" (p. 159).

Finally, we also recommend keeping grammar and graded classroom concerns separate. Nowhere in the agreement is the separation of grammar and grading mentioned, but it has been the practice of the researchers to separate these concerns. We are unsure if the participant teachers did this as well, but we assume, based on survey responses, that some did not. When asked for drafts of a paper, we asked for two copies if the student asked for grammar feedback: one that would be used for graded concerns and one in which grammar errors would be marked. We also kept grammar conferences separate from conferences we had with students about other concerns. This practice helps to reinforce to students that grammar is not the primary concern in their writing classes, but it is still important enough to address and focus on in out-of-class meetings. Hartshorn et al. (2010) suggest a separation as well: "Efforts to improve accuracy may be more successful if separated from attempts to develop other aspects of ESL writing" (p. 102).

Conclusions

The use of grammar agreements with L2 writing students is beneficial for a number of reasons. In particular, grammar agreements are a way to incorporate grammar instruction into L2 writing classes without affecting student grades or taking over classroom content, complementing recommendations made recently in the field of L2 writing (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Student agency is an important part of the agreements as well, as 97.3% of students reported that they "Strongly Agree" (47.3%), "Agree" (36.5%), or "Somewhat Agree" (13.5%) with the statement, "I liked being able to choose the amount of grammar feedback I received." With the grammar agreement, students are able to take part in the decision for how grammar will be approached in their papers and have agency in their own learning. The instructor responses supported that students liked to have more agency and that most students wanted grammar feedback (regardless of agreement selection).

The instructor surveys also clearly demonstrate two other important points about grammar agreement implementation. It is important to explain the options to students clearly so that the students have maximum understanding of what they are selecting and have more agency in their choice. It is also important to remember that the grammar agreements, how teachers respond, and how teachers conduct grammar conferences should be individually tailored based on both teaching styles and specific student needs/abilities. No one version of the grammar agreement will be equally effective in all teaching situations. Therefore, customization is a necessary component in implementing grammar agreements. In addition, as L2 writing literature suggests, it is always a good idea for teachers to thoroughly explain any and all of their feedback practices, techniques, and procedures, "rather than assume that everyone (both instructor and students) is operating under the same philosophies and assumptions" (Ferris, 2003, p. 93).

Although this study was done in the specific context of L2 writing classrooms, we see the grammar agreements as a strategy that teachers can use in many different contexts of teaching writing—regardless of the students' language background. For example, this same agreement could

be used for mainstream and mixed composition classes, writing across the curriculum, basic and developmental writing, graduate writing classes, and any other context where the teacher may feel the need to give grammar feedback. We also see this concept working in contexts such as the writing center, as it may disambiguate where to start giving feedback and how to allot energy within a tutoring session. However, before asking students, who may not be as acutely aware of their grammar needs, we suggest first implementing a grammar awareness activity or survey, such as the one found in *Language Power: Tutorials for Writers* (Ferris, 2014, pp. xiii–xxii). This preemptive survey will allow students to make informed decisions about the amount of grammar feedback that they would appreciate.

Overall, grammar agreements are a thoughtful method of managing the potentially burdensome workload of giving grammar feedback. Future research may improve on this model by exploring how grammar agreements affect student satisfaction with classroom content and grades. Additionally, a longitudinal study may also be developed to see if the choices students make in the grammar agreement have long-term effects on writing or grammar improvement. By tailoring the amount and type of feedback given to students through the use of grammar agreements, and by involving students directly in that decision, these agreements can be one option to provide the more finely-tuned approach to written corrective feedback that may benefit both student and teacher.

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Appendix

Grammar Agreement

This is a composition class and not a grammar class. Grammar will not be the main subject of this class, nor will it be something that you're graded on. However, many students learning English as a second language may wish to improve their grammar. Because of this, you will be given three options for how your instructors will respond to grammar in your papers. *Please note: None of these options will affect the grade of your writing in any way.*

1. **Extensive Grammar Feedback**: If you are interested in receiving extensive grammar feedback, your instructor will note (but not correct) most major nonstandard grammatical constructions or spellings on first drafts. If you choose this option, you will be expected to meet with your instructor with an additional draft between first and revised drafts to have a 15-minute grammar conference. In this additional draft, you will need to attempt to correct all marked items. During the grammar conference, these corrections will be discussed, and you can raise any questions or concerns about your corrections.
2. **Focused Grammar Feedback**: If you are interested in receiving some grammar feedback, your instructor will note (but again, not correct) one to three *repeated* nonstandard grammatical constructions or spellings on first drafts. If you choose this option, your instructor will expect that you will attempt to improve your use of these nonstandard constructions for your final draft. You may also have a grammar conference if you choose to, but this is optional.
3. **Minimal Grammar Feedback**: If you are not interested in receiving grammar feedback, your instructor will not mark nonstandard grammatical constructions or spellings unless he or she does not understand the meaning of the sentence. If you choose this option, nonstandard constructions will not be addressed in any drafts, but you're still welcome to meet with your instructor outside of class time to discuss grammar issues if you'd like.

Please circle the number of the option from the choices above. If, at any time, you choose to change the kind of grammar feedback you will receive, please just let your instructor know.

Name:⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯

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