Does using automated written corrective feedback affect the validity of writing coursework assignments?

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Theoretical context
- Academic writing presents a dual challenge for L2 writers (content + language)
- Process-writing approach is used to separate types of feedback across multiple drafts
- Indirect written corrective feedback (WCF) in the form of correction coding may boost language acquisition and learner autonomy
- L2 writers use online grammar checkers and other digital tools, making it harder to verify students' work via plagiarism checkers

Learning context
- Pre-sessional courses as a pathway to Swansea University degree programmes (exit at B2 / B2+ level)
- EAP: focus on language + academic skills
- **Assessment *for* learning**: **70%**

writing, reading, listening and speaking assignments designed to be formative and replicate university practices

- **Assessment *of* learning**: **30%**

integrated exam (end of course)

Research context
- Control + experimental group
- Grammar input for both, linked to common error categories (articles, subject-verb agreement)
- 2 x 500-word essays across multiple drafts with tutor WCF (see Figure 1)

1: Extended plan	→	Tutor comments: **content** only
2: First draft	→	Tutor WCF: **language** only
3: Second draft	→	Final tutor feedback + grade

Figure 1: Essay cycle

Automated written corrective feedback (AWCF)
Experimental group:
- Had unlimited access to **e-rater** which gives AWCF through **highlighting** grammar errors (see Figure 2); only certain error categories were enabled (Grammar + Usage)
- Could click through to the *Writer's Handbook* for detailed explanations
- Could correct errors on Word drafts **before** receiving tutor WCF
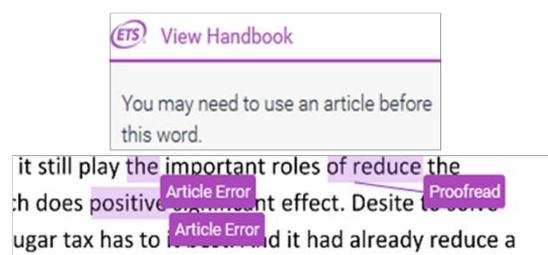- Could use grammar reference materials given during class input

Figure 2: e-rater error feedback and highlighting

Results
- Experimental group had fewer errors, though less significant for second essay cycle (see Figure 3)
- Students felt e-rater helped them improve their writing and work more independently, but still valued tutor feedback
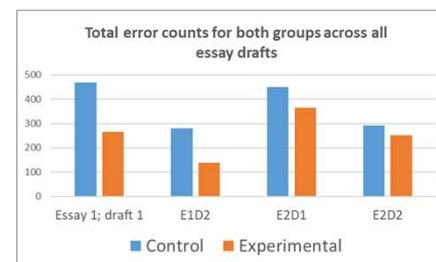

Figure 3: error counts for control and experimental group

AWCF: does it challenge the validity of the assessment procedure?

- E-rater only **highlights** errors, mimicking indirect WCF; some grammar checkers (e.g. Grammarly) offer corrections and this might arguably affect validity
- Students must **handwrite** a part of each essay draft in class under exam conditions (English-English dictionaries only)
- EAP focus, i.e. for specific purposes so **replicating** what they will do in university
- Many L2 writers **already** use online writing, editing and translation tools and these are likely to become more prevalent and sophisticated in the future

Conclusion
One of the main issues with AWCF has been with accuracy and reliability, specifically with regard to more complex sentence-level errors. However, tutor WCF also has inconsistencies and is time-consuming. If students can be encouraged to take a more independent and analytical approach to editing their writing and making connections to in-class language support and input, tutors could focus on more meaningful feedback at sentence, paragraph and discourse level. For the assessment for learning approach to be successful, students must be engaged and supported in the process of continuous improvement. Greater confidence in deconstructing and editing their writing may actually positively affect the validity of coursework assignments, as long as effective control measures are in place.

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