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## The Role of Written Corrective Feedback in EFL Writing

### Introduction

Although there is a great effort done by EFL teachers to develop students' writing skills, students still face many challenges in writing, and they cannot achieve their writing teachers' goals. According to Azim Javadi-Safa (2018, p.15), "most students, more or less proficient alike, see writing as a difficult task that they have to struggle with to pass their exams." Students' inability to write meaningful and grammatically correct sentences and well-written paragraphs and texts is due to many factors such as the emphasis on the product approach over the process approach to writing (Azim Javadi-Safa, 2018), lack of effective feedback' provision on students writing, teachers' unproductive method of teaching writing (Azim Javadi-Safa, 2018), and their perceptions of the provision of written corrective feedback (WCF). Writing in second (L2) and foreign language (FL) can also be challenging to many students at college or university level because of the different micro and macro aspects it involves, including organization, content, grammar, syntax, word choice, and composition of a communicative text. Essentially, teachers' most important goal is to enhance the writing of their students to become good writers. Therefore, WCF provision on students' written products is an effective element to achieve this goal.

### Defining feedback

Researchers have defined feedback either broadly or narrowly by focusing on writing as an example. On the one hand, John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007) states that "feedback is conceptualized as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (p. 81). On the other hand, Keh (1990) defines feedback as the teacher's input to a writer's composition in the form of information to be used for revision. Similarly, Mubarak (2013) considers it a "teacher's response to students' writing in the form of oral or written comments that aim to help them improve their writing performance" (p. 54). Thus, feedback may be either written or oral in form. Written feedback can be given either in the form of correction, including direct correction, indirect correction, and coding or in other forms in which teachers focus on metalinguistic explanation, marginal and content comments (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Unlike written feedback, oral feedback, which will not be the focus of this paper, includes many corrective strategies such as explicit correction, recasts, classification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

### The importance of WCF

WCF is of great importance because of the following reasons:

- Students want to move to the next level of English FL studies or university studies and succeed in college, as many other students do. Writing is the key to all these things, and WCF can help improve students' writing.
- WCF aligns with the dominant philosophy of learning, which is active learning. WCF is a way for students to edit their work and become their own best editors
- Students want and expect WCF. Teachers might have a little revolution on their hands in their classes if they did not provide feedback. So, they are expected to provide it.
- And finally, there is an issue of accuracy in writing. The latter is often viewed differently from speaking. Teachers tend to tolerate a certain amount of errors in speaking, but they do not tolerate them in writing, and that is true even for native speakers of English. Teachers have the idea that writing should be error-free. Accuracy is a major factor in standardized writing exams. So, students are maybe doing well with ideas and with organizations, but if they lack accuracy, they may not pass the standardized writing exam. In their study on the effectiveness of focused

and unfocused written CF in developing high proficient L2 learners' accuracy in the use of the two English definite articles "a" and "the" Farrokhi and Sattarpour (2012) found that the focused WCF is more effective in improving the grammatical accuracy of high proficient L2 writers as far as the use of definite articles is concerned.

### **Typology of WCF**

Written corrective feedback usually takes the forms of direct correction, indirect correction, and coding.

**Direct correction** (direct feedback) is when the teacher corrects students' errors in their scripts by writing the correct structural or lexical form (Lalande, 1982). Bitchener and Ferris (2012) argue that this type of correction draws students' attention to the error and provides a solution to it. The teacher shows students where their errors are and corrects these errors by providing the correct form (Sia and Cheung, 2017). This type of correction takes a variety of forms, such as Crossing-out, rewriting, and additions. If readers observe the following sentence "climate change still have (has) a big effect on all the human (s), "they will see that the teacher has responded to the errors by crossing them and has written the correct form right next to the spot where the error was. Thus, the teacher is providing the answer to the student. This method, as its name implies, is known as an explicit correction, where the teacher provides the correct answer to the student. Many researchers claim that students often like this kind of feedback as they are getting the answer to their errors. If the teacher asks students to rewrite, then what is needed to rewrite is right there; it is quite easy for students to do that. However, this method is quite a time consuming for the teacher to do; that is to cross and provide the right answer. Direct corrective feedback is generally preferred by the student but also can be quite a time consuming for teachers. Sia and Cheung (2017) support this by stating that "giving written corrective feedback is a time-consuming process for teachers as they have to go through students' writings in detail and provide feedback" (p.69).

**Indirect correction** (indirect feedback) is when the teacher indicates that there are errors in students' writing by underlining errors or circling them without providing corrections (Bitchener and knock, 2010). It is drawing students' attention to the locations of their errors without providing corrections (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Teachers, for example, can underline, circle, highlight, and use lines to indicate the location of errors. This kind of corrective feedback also has positive and negative sides. Back to the previous sentence with the same errors on it, "climate change still has a big effect on all the human (s), "the teacher has identified the error for the student, but he/she has not corrected it. This is what is called an indirect correction. The teacher is providing a clue as to the location of the error. This helps the student identifies which word or words may be a little problematic, but the teacher is not correcting. At its best, students often prefer this little bit less than they do for direct correction because it makes their work a little bit harder. The teacher still locates the error, and that is very important because it is clear that students have a hard time finding the locations of their errors. No surprise, because if they could locate their errors, they could probably correct them on their own. So, it is important for the teacher to indicate the error. Still, this method is different from the former as it asks the student to do the cognitive work that is required to correct the error. A question that is still under debate and which is based on individual differences is what type of students would benefit more from indirect feedback. According to Sia and Cheung (2017), students with high-level proficiency are more profitable of indirect feedback as their linguistic knowledge helps them to correct the types of errors. In contrast, low achieving students, as found in Lui's (2008) study, which was cited by Sia and Cheung (2017), make use of direct correction more than they do with the indirect one.

**Coding**, as another form of indirect corrective feedback, is when the teacher uses codes to indicate the location and type of error (Sia and Cheung, 2017) without correcting the error (e.g., S for spelling, T for tense, WW for word order). This method is also called coded feedback. Hendrickson (1984) considered an error correction code as an implicit type of correction. According to him, the use of codes involves symbols and abbreviations (e.g., Sing/Pl for singular and plural errors) through which

students know the locations and types of errors on their original texts. In the following sentence, "climate change still has (SVA) a big effect on all the (Art) human (Pl) " the teacher has provided codes that indicate the type of error with the insertion of the code. Going a little bit further, it is a kind of a scaffolding approach than the indirect method, but not quite a scaffolding as a direct method. It is a sort of in-between method of error correction. It locates the error and the code, then provides little support for students. The latter can identify through the code what type of error they made. The three types of correction are seen as different levels of scaffolding, with direct correction as being the most scaffolded and indirect correction as being the least scaffolded, and the coded correction as being somewhere in the middle. The challenge with doing coded correction is that students have to know and understand the code. If you are using the code like (SVA), typically that is used for Subject Verb Agreement, but students have to know that, recognize the code and understand it for them to respond properly to correct it. As a teacher, if you are asking students to rewrite, which typically most teachers do, then the code will help them do that. Students like this type of corrective feedback. It makes them somehow work harder, and the only challenge behind this method is that they have to know the code. Thus, teachers opting for this method are recommended to teach the code first.

Other forms of teacher written feedback are marginal comments, content comments, meta- linguistic explanation, verbal rule reminders, and minimal marking.

### **Limitations of WCF**

- WCF is very time-consuming for teachers and students. Teachers sometimes forget how time-consuming it can be for students because they are so busy grading so many papers, but depending on the type of feedback they give students. Students also can spend a bit of time on revision, perhaps more time than teachers have given to correcting a paper.
- Student may not review teachers' WCF carefully.
- Students may not understand WCF. This depends on the type of WCF teachers are giving, or it may be students not understanding the issue.
- Some WCF may not be effective generally, or it may not be effective for the student. Wang and Jiang (2015) argued that the main objection to the practice of WCF revolves around the limited effectiveness of the explicit knowledge such as grammatical rules and linguistic forms of language on developing learners' writing performance. According to Wang and Jiang (2015), the current situation has given great emphasis on the importance of implicit knowledge in developing learners' communicative abilities rather than on the explicit knowledge that is gained from the instruction of linguistic forms and grammatical rules. Another criticism for the effectiveness of WCF has been acknowledged by Truscott (1996). He based his arguments on Pienemann's (1989) Learnability Hypothesis, claiming that learners will never be in a position to acquire a second/foreign language since WCF focuses on linguistic structures that are beyond learners' level of language acquisition. More importantly, WCF may lead to harmful side effects (Truscott, 1996) in the sense that it increases learners' anxiety and low self-esteem and therefore discouraging them from writing (Wang and Jiang, 2015). Besides, learners prefer to resort to writing in simple forms rather than complex ones because of their fear of making writing mistakes or constructing inaccurate structures. Another harmful side of WCF is that feedback provision has become the central focus of instruction (Truscott, 1996) at the expense of other more important classroom activities and practices. Also, teachers are not often at the level to provide adequate and consistent WCF because of their background as non-native speakers. Therefore, it is possible that this would affect negatively learners' writing accuracy.

### **Suggestions for providing WCF**

- As a teacher, you may need to respond differently to the types of errors. If it is the rule-bound error, you may want just to locate the error providing an indirect correction. If it is an idiomatic error, you may want to provide some direct correction to support students as they may lack

the proficiency level that helps them identify their errors and correct them (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012; Hendrickson, 1984)

- If your students are high level, you may want to provide them with indirect corrective feedback; whereas if they are low achieving students, you may need to support them with direct correction.
- With the help of technology, typically what you need to do is read the text, and when there is an error, you say that is a mistake, that is a subject-verb agreement error, and you need to address that, and then you will continue reading depending on the length of the text. You may need to have a sound file of 2 or 3 minutes.
- Another thing that you can do is you can number the error in the student's text as you go along and then categorize them in a table. It is quite simple to make a table of your students' most common errors and so if the two first errors are to be article errors, you can list them in the article row in your table. All that provides a kind of profile to your students to see. They can see how many errors they are making and which type, and this allows to build awareness of their most common errors. That is one possibility, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: *Error categorization*

Error category	Number		
Sentence Structure	7		
Verb Form/Tense	3	6	
Subject Verb Agreement			
Articles	1	2	5
Spelling	4		

- Another thing if you do not want to categorize them, you can still create a table (Table 2) for the student, number of the mistakes, and then ask the student to categorize them themselves. That is another challenge and another activity that you can do. Thus, all these are some of the interesting ways for teachers to reduce their working load related to providing WCF.

Table 2: Error categorization

Error Category	Number		
	7		
	6	3	
	1	2	5
	4		

### Issues to Be Considered in Feedback Provision

Based on the literature (Brookhart, 2008; Bitchener and Ferris, 2012), there are almost eight essential practices that characterize the implementation of feedback or its provision. They are, in general related to (purpose, source, form, amount, timing, focus, mode, and audience).

**Purpose of feedback:** Many teachers have confusion over the purpose of feedback since the distinction between feedback that provides advice (formative) and feedback that offers evaluation (summative) are unclear (Black & William, 1998; Burke & Pieterick, 2010).

Wiggins (1997), who defined the types above, argued that the evaluative feedback purpose is to make sure the students clearly understand what the mark is for a task or assignment. In contrast, the advisory

feedback purpose is threefold; to provide learners with information about their performance in a task, to identify aspects which need improvement or support, and to aid the students' progress by telling what steps to take to move forward and to improve their writing in the future.

**Source of feedback:** The feedback can come from the teacher, from peers, and the learners themselves in self-assessment. About peer feedback, students can freely assist each other and provide advice during the process of writing rather than at the end of the writing session. Thus, peer feedback is advantageous in the sense that students play an active role in learning writing, use their peers' ideas to redraft their writing (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994), and can receive different points of view about their writing from different peer groups (Chaudrun, 1983). At its worst, it is considered time-consuming and lengthy, students may find it difficult to accept criticism from their peers and may respond defensively to their feedback, peer responses address surface issues rather than problems of meaning (Keh, 1990), and finally, some students may offer inadequate feedback as it is difficult for them to identify errors in their peers' writing (Horowitz, 1986).

**Form of the feedback:** Feedback can be guided (controlled) by the use of checklists, whereas it can be uncontrolled when spoken or written comments are given on the strengths and weaknesses of the piece of writing without the systematic coverage of a scale.

**Feedback amount** (Amount of feedback): It is related to how much feedback to give and on how many points to target (Brookhart, 2008; Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Some teachers might prefer giving feedback on all aspects of writing, whereas, at the other extreme, others might focus on important aspects of students' writing. To put it simply, written feedback can be given on parts of a piece of writing, for example, when someone sits next to the writer and reads what they have just written after every two or three sentences are written; as well as on the whole of a piece of writing, or a portfolio of writing. Researchers like Lee (2013) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012) talked about how much written corrective feedback should be given in writing. They stated that teachers could choose between two types depending on their preferences: the first is selective WCF (marking a few specific error categories in a focused manner), whereas the second is comprehensive WCF (marking all errors in an unfocused manner). Brookhart (2008) explained that despite teachers seek to fix everything they see, and they have to take into account all the following three simultaneously dimensions: 1) the topic in general and teacher's learning target or targets in particular, 2) typical developmental learning progressions for those topics or targets and 3) individual students.

**Timing of feedback:** Feedback can be immediate or delayed (Brookhart, 2008). In other words, the feedback is either done promptly or done later. For example, a test can be received the next day, or it can be handed to students two weeks after it is completed. The important points, however, are to acknowledge the feedback that comes while students are still thinking of the topic, the assignment, or the performance in question; while they are still mindful of the learning goal as a learning goal. It especially needs to come while they still have some reason to work on the learning target.

**Feedback focus** (Focus of feedback): Teachers should be focused on giving feedback to their students (Brookhart, 2008). They are required to describe specific qualities of the work about the learning targets, make observations about students' learning processes and strategies that will help them figure out how to improve, foster student self-efficacy by drawing connections between students' work and their mindful, intentional efforts and lastly avoid personal comments. The focus of feedback can be achieved by teachers in different ways. Some teachers might choose between focusing on serious errors (those that cause communication breakdowns) or minor errors (do not obscure the comprehensiveness of the text); others may address frequent errors (errors that individual students make frequently) or infrequent errors. In contrast, others may focus on either local errors (relate to language form) versus global ones (related to the content and organization). Feedback can also focus on all aspects of the written product, or it can be narrowed down to focus on only one or two. Having a narrow focus can make peer evaluation more effective.

**Feedback mode** (Mode of feedback): Brookhart (2008) stated that feedback could be delivered in many modalities, including written feedback, oral feedback, a combination of written and spoken feedback,

demonstration, and conversation with students. He further emphasized that the feedback message should be communicated in the most appropriate way. For example, using oral feedback for students who do not read well or when there is more information to convey, and using written feedback for comments that students need to be able to save and look over. Demonstrations are also useful if the student needs to see how to do something or what something looks like. Another modality that teachers may prefer to use is called teacher-student conferencing. This is a discussion between teacher and individual students or a group of students about graded and corrected composition. It has different conferencing styles (teacher-centered - student-centered - collaborative) and conferencing formats (one-to-one conference - group conference and online conference).

**Feedback audience** (Size of the audience): It deals with the kind of audience the teacher address. The feedback can be delivered to an individual student for reforming an individual problem, and it can be given to a group of students (Brookhart, 2008) if the whole class would benefit from it. In other words, a teacher can give feedback to the whole class, to small groups, and individuals.

### Conclusion

This paper has just been an attempt to discuss some important issues related to WCF, which can provide illuminating guidelines for EFL language teachers and learners, educational settings, including language institutes, schools, and universities. The paper has cast light on the importance of teacher WCF in students' development of general writing accuracy and the types, limitations, and implementation of WCF. It has ended with suggesting several practical issues that should be taken into consideration when providing feedback. At its best, the paper can be a source of motivation for prospective researchers and teachers to do more investigations and reading on the issue of WCF, which is still considered an ongoing debate for the last three decades.

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