

A Review of Researches on Teachers' WCF in the Field of Second Language Writing—Taking the Learning Effectiveness of Domestic University English Learners as an Example

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Keywords: Written Corrective Feedback, Domestic University Learners, English Writing

Abstract: As a significant area of research within applied linguistics, teachers' written corrective feedback has been studied for over three decades. The focus has been largely on examining its effects on second language writing and acquisition. This dissertation aims to summarize recent researches on the impact of written corrective feedback by teachers on the English writing ability of domestic university learners through literature review. The research questions are as follows: Is the teacher's written corrective feedback effective in college students' English writing teaching? What type of written corrective feedback is the most effective? The study's findings indicate that teachers' written error correction feedback is useful for college-level English writing instruction. Nevertheless, each error correction feedback approach has its own benefits and drawbacks, so pedagogues should be judicious in selecting correction techniques during teaching activities. In addition, this paper identifies the shortcomings in previous domestic research and offers suggestions for improvement. It is hoped that the research findings presented in this paper can inspire further related research and improve college English writing instruction.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, English has become the most popular and widely used language in the world, which has led to a boom in English learning in many countries around the world, and our country is no exception. As an extremely important skill for the mastery of English, writing mainly examines the output ability of learners. In the meanwhile, many researchers and English teachers attach great importance to the writing teaching. WCF (written corrective feedback), as an important part of the writing teaching process, has received increasing attention. Although Truscott (1996) [1] argued that grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned, many subsequent researches have successfully refuted his argument. For example, Ferris (1999) [2] questioned his argument and claimed that we should keep our own experiences and intuitions in mind, listen to our students, and consider their needs in deciding if, when, and how to provide error feedback and correction to L2 student writers. The research questions are as follows: Is the teacher's WCF effective in college students' English writing teaching? This thesis will focus on

combining researchers' studies on the effectiveness of WTF in teaching writing to domestic EFL students in the recent years.

This paper will first give a brief introduction to the definition and classification of WCF and errors. Secondly, it will briefly introduce some related researches. Thirdly, the research questions of this paper will be answered. Finally, the shortcomings of the previous researches will be presented and suggestions for future researches will be made.

2. Literature Review

2.1 An Introduction to WCF

What does feedback in WCF mean? "Feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. It can be defined as input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision." [3]. "Through feedback, the writer learns where he or she has misled or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas, or something like inappropriate word-choice or tense." [3]. According to Chaudron (1977) [4], corrective feedback refers to any explicit response that a teacher gives to a learner's non-target output when communicating in the target language, with the intent of modifying or requesting modifications of his or her non-target output. In the monograph of *Written Corrective Feedback for L2 Development*, John Bitchener and Neomy Storch give the definition of WTF. "Written CF is a written response to a linguistic error that has been made in the writing of a text by an L2 learner. It seeks to either correct the inaccurate usage or provide information about where the error has occurred and/or about the cause of the error and how it may be corrected." [5].

2.2 An Introduction to Seven Types of WCF

According to Ellis (2008), the strategies for providing feedback are direct CF (correct feedback), indirect CF, metalinguistic CF, focused CF, unfocused CF, electronic feedback and reformulation.

2.2.1 Direct WCF

Ellis (2008) points out that by WCF, the teacher tells the mistakes or errors directly and provides the student with the correct forms. For example, if a student writes sentence A, the teacher should insert "pieces" between "three" and "advice", and then underline the word "advices" and write the correct form "advice" above or near to the erroneous form. (A. *I am going to give the following three advices.) "Direct CF has the advantage that it provides learners with explicit guidance about how to correct their errors. This is clearly desirable if learners do not know what the correct form is (i.e. are not capable of self-correcting the error)." "However, a disadvantage is that it requires minimal processing on the part of the learner and thus, although it might help them to produce the correct form when they revise their writing, it may not contribute to long-term learning." [6].

2.2.2 Indirect WCF

"Indirect CF involves indicating that the student has made an error without actually correcting it. This can be done by underlining the errors or using cursors to show omissions in the student's text or by placing a cross in the margin next to the line containing the error. In effect, this involves deciding whether or not to show the precise location of the error." [6]. For instance, if a student writes sentence A (see above), the teacher could provide the feedback in the following two ways. One is that the teacher suggests the precise location of the error, and he or she could underline the two words, "two advices". (*I am going to give the following three advices.) The other is that the

teacher suggests the blurred location of the error, and he or she could place a cross in the margin next to the line containing the error. (*I am going to give the following three advices. X) As Ellis (2008) [6] says, indirect feedback caters to guided learning and problem solving and encourages students to reflect about linguistic forms, so it is considered more likely to lead to long-term learning.

2.2.3 Metalinguistic WCF

“Metalinguistic CF involves providing learners with some form of explicit comment about the nature of the errors they have made. The explicit comment can take two forms. By far the most common is the use of error codes. These consist of abbreviated labels for different kinds of errors. The labels can be placed over the location of the error in the text or in the margin. In the latter case, the exact location of the error may or may not be shown.” [6]. For instance, if a student writes sentence A (see above), the teacher could either place the letter “U” over the word “advices” or place it in the margin next to the line containing this word. “The second type of metalinguistic CF consists of providing students with metalinguistic explanations of their errors.” [6]. In response to the above error, the teacher should point out that the word “advice” is an uncountable word and it is supposed to go with the word “piece”.

2.2.4 Focused and Unfocused WCF

According to Ellis (2008) [6], if the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the students’ errors, then what strategy he or she chooses is unfocused WCF. If the teacher selects one or two specific types of errors to correct, then what he or she chooses is focused WCF. Ellis (2008) [6] also mentions that focused WCF may help learners to examine multiple corrections of a single error and thus obtain the rich evidence they need to both understand why what they wrote was erroneous and to acquire the correct form, and also to promote not just attention but also understanding of the nature of the error. As for unfocused WCF, he notes that unfocused WCF has the advantage of addressing a range of errors and it may prove superior in the long run.

2.2.5 Electronic Feedback

According to Ellis (2008) [6], by electronic feedback, the teacher indicates an error and provides a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage. Supposing a student writes sentence A (see above), the teacher could indicate the error first and then provide the student with a file concerning the usage of the word “advice”. “There are some obvious advantages to this option. One is that it removes the need for the teacher to be the arbiter of what constitutes a correct form. Teachers’ intuitions about grammatical correctness are often fallible; arguably, a usage-based approach is more reliable. It can also be argued that the key to effective error correction is identifying the learner’s textual intention.” [6].

2.2.6 Reformulation

“Reformulation consists of a native speaker’s reworking of the students’ entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact.” [6]. It is clear that reformulation requires the learners to identify the specific changes that have been made. As a consequence, they need to concentrate on looking for the errors they have made and attach great importance to them. In addition, it is possible for them to learn more authentic English.

2.3 An Introduction to Errors

Errors are systematic and occur when a learner has not yet thoroughly understood the rules and the system of the language being studied. They arise due to incomplete knowledge of the target language and insufficient learning competence. According to Su Jianhong (2020) [7], errors can also be divided into intra-lingual and interlingual errors. Intra-lingual errors consist of two situations: one is the learner's lack of knowledge of the target language, e.g. he has never learned, has forgotten or has not yet internalized a certain type of knowledge, and the other is the learner's incomplete knowledge of the target language. Interlingual errors, on the other hand, are errors made by the learner as a result of interference from his or her mother tongue knowledge. In relation to the presentation of WCF, the comparatively most conventional and widespread types include teachers' corrective feedback on students' errors in their writing and teachers' comment at the end of the students' writing. It is a fact that students may make all kinds of errors. "Categories of errors range from the strictly "linguistic" (phonological, morphological, syntactic), to subject matter "content" (factual and conceptual knowledge) and lexical items, to errors of classroom interaction and discourse." [4].

3. Researches

3.1 Direct and Indirect WCF Researches

There are studies that show the advantages and disadvantages of direct and indirect WCF respectively. For instance, Wu Xuefeng (2017) [8] examined how direct and indirect WCF impacted on the complexity of English writing, both at the lexical and sentence levels. The subjects of this study are sixty first-year English majors, fifty six of which are female, and four of which are male. The study revealed that neither direct nor indirect WCF significantly enhanced lexical complexity, but to a large extent they enhanced syntactic complexity. In addition, the findings also showed that direct WCF had the most considerable impact on T-units and clause length, while indirect WCF was more prone to increasing the rate of clause use among students. What's more, further analysis suggested that it was worth noting that none of the WCF types significantly raised the number of clause types that the students used.

3.2 Metalinguistic WCF Researches

The impact of WCF by teachers on their students' writing is also dependent on the language errors' type and the students' engagement. In his study, Hou Jiandong (2023) [9] analyzed how two types of meta-linguistic WCF - error codes and grammatical descriptions - affect writing and how they are influenced by these two variables. Also, the subjects of his research are first-year university students who are non-English majors. The study examined five types of errors: verb tense errors, coronal errors, pronoun errors, run-on, and fragment. The findings indicated that both types of meta-linguistic feedback were generally effective, but grammatical descriptions were slightly better. Additionally, both types of feedback were effective for most linguistic errors except discourse errors. Lastly, grammatical descriptions were effective on the cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal dimensions, while error codes showed high correlation with learner engagement on cognitive and attitudinal dimensions.

3.3 The Comparison of Direct, Indirect and Metalinguistic WCF Researches

Some studies have compared the effects of direct, indirect and metalinguistic WCF on English

learners' writing.

Thinking styles of learners are broadly categorized into linear and non-linear thinking. Linear thinkers are habitual of exploring and discovering rules. They are characterized by their proficiency in "logic and reasoning". Non-linear thinkers are skilled in understanding and processing information through intuition, creativity or insight. They are characterized by their proficiency in "intuition and insight". Su Jianhong (2014a) [10] investigated the effects of three types of WCF, direct, indirect and metalinguistic WCF, on learners of these two types of thinking based on errors involving non-true conditional sentences. The subjects of this study are one hundred and twenty second-year and third-year English majors. The experimental results show that these three types of WCF are effective for learners of both types of thinking, with metalinguistic WCF being the most effective, followed by direct WCF, and finally indirect WCF; linear thinkers who receive direct WCF or indirect WCF learn significantly better than non-linear thinkers, but learners who receive metalinguistic WCF are more effective than non-linear thinkers, while those who receive indirect WCF are less effective than non-linear thinkers. The second result is due to the fact that the learning effect of linear thinkers receiving direct WCF or indirect WCF is significantly better than that of non-linear thinkers. The second result is due to the fact that linear thinkers have a significant or large advantage over non-linear thinkers because non-true conditional sentences are highly regular linguistic structures.

Also, in his study, Su Jianhong (2020) [7] carried out two experiments focused on intralingual and interlingual error feedback, with each experiment consisting of one hundred and twenty sophomore participants. The findings revealed that metalinguistic WCF was the most effective way, followed by the direct WCF, and finally the indirect WCF, regardless of whether the errors were intralingual or interlingual; and regardless of the type of error correction, intralingual errors were better than interlingual errors; these error correction methods had good immediate effects on both intralingual and interlingual errors, but due to the implicit interference of the mother tongue. Intralingual errors are affected by the error correction methods in a more long-term way than interlingual errors. The results of this study shed some light on teachers' writing instruction. It is better to directly adopt the metalinguistic written correction feedback when to correct intra-lingual errors; when to correct interlingual errors, the metalinguistic written correction feedback can also be adopted, but teachers must still pay attention to students' mastery of interlanguage errors, and teach and correct the students who make the errors again.

However, in Qin Lili & Niu Baogui's (2022) [11] research, indirect WCF was more effective than direct WCF. They compared the effect of direct and indirect WCF on essay revision based on the written languaging activity (written languaging refers to the use of written language by the learner to express his or her own interpretations, reflections or conclusions about what he or she has learned), and their subjects are twelve female non-English majors who have low levels of English proficiency. The results of the study showed that both direct and indirect WCF were helpful in assisting students to make corrections for errors in writing, but written languaging based on indirect WCF was more effective in improving the quality of compositions. It could be surmised that the reason for the different results of this study and the two above studies may be due to the inclusion of written languaging in the second research.

3.4 Focused and Unfocused WCF Researches

Xiao Pingfei and Liu Xinting (2021) [12] examined how focused and unfocused WCF impact students' English preposition acquisition in writing. The subjects are fifty non-English majors. The study revealed that both focused and unfocused WCF aided students in acquiring English prepositions in writing. Nonetheless, in the short-term, focused WCF had a more significant impact,

while unfocused WCF dominated in the long-term. Meanwhile, the results of the study also showed that if teachers matches the two types of WCF with metalinguistic WCF, i.e., “focused WCF + metalinguistic WCF” and “unfocused WCF + metalinguistic WCF”, it would help students acquire English prepositions more effectively in writing. Also, the results of this study provided valuable information for teachers. If the goal is to prepare for an upcoming test, “focused WCF + metalinguistic WCF” can be chosen; otherwise, if the aim is a more sustained mastery of prepositions, “unfocused WCF + metalinguistic WCF” can be chosen.

3.5 Other Researches

Li Jing (2013) [13] analyzed a set of essays written by twenty third-year English majors (each of them having written six essays), fifteen of which were female, and five were male, during a one-year period. According to the study’s findings, teachers’ written feedback had a positive influence on the development of students’ English writing skills. Corrective feedback was effective in boosting the linguistic accuracy of students’ compositions, while non-corrective feedback enhanced students’ language competency and directed them towards considering the overall effect of their written discourse, making their compositions more coherent and improving overall quality.

The phenomenon of fossilization is a cause of concern for almost all teachers. “Selinker’s classic 1972 article on ‘Interlanguage’ introduced the concept of fossilization. This refers to the idea that, despite receiving explanations and instructions about the target language, some expressions, rules, and subsystems of the L1 will always be present in the intermediate language of the target language, regardless of the age of the learner. In essence, this means that irrespective of the learners’ age or the amount of explanation and instruction about the target language they receive, some expressions, rules, and subsystems of their mother tongue will always appear in the intermediate language of their target. When words and expressive structures are repeatedly used for an extended period (usually around five years, according to Selinker’s criterion), fossilisation occurs.” [14]. It needs to notice that fossilization can be either an incorrect or a correct form of the target language. Li Yanwu (2014) [14] found in her study on English writing teaching that teachers’ WCF has the potential to reduce fossilization. However, learners’ individual differences also impact the effectiveness of feedback implementation and their attitude towards reducing their fossilization tendencies. Furthermore, WCF can only be truly effective when it addresses deeply ingrained psychological tendencies in learners. Additionally, reducing fossilization tendencies is a time-consuming process.

Some studies testing the effectiveness of the WCF also incorporate the component of self-correction by second language learners. For example, Hou Jiandong (2015) [15] examined the effect of WCF on the accuracy of second language writing in terms of three types of errors: fragment, run-on sentence, and subject-verb disagreement, as well as the role of checklists in corrective feedback. Also, the subjects of his research are second-year university English majors. The results showed that WCF could improve students’ writing accuracy and the use of checklists could further enhance the effect of corrective feedback, but both had a delayed effect, i.e., the effects of both did not take effect immediately at the initial stage of writing, but rather played a role as the writing process progresses.

There are also studies show that WCF would affect students’ learning achievement in second language writing from the perspective of psychology. For example, Han Ye & Xu Yueting (2020) conducted the related study from the perspective of Positive Psychology, informed by the control-value theory and this study’s subjects are four non-English majors. The result suggested that WCF induced a wide range of discrete learning emotions, including positive, neutral and negative emotions of high, medium and low activation levels and with great intra-individual and inter-individual variations. The study also revealed that the students used emotion-oriented, appraisal-

oriented, and situation-oriented strategies to self-regulate emotions throughout their revision processes. As a consequence, teachers need to lead students to develop positive and subjective evaluations of the worth of feedback, revision and writing assignments, assist students in emotional regulation and persuade and encourage students to believe in their ability to improve their writing skills through hard work.

4. Results

The two research questions have already been explored in prior investigations. The novelty of this paper lies in its contribution to refining the responses to these inquiries, offering a more contemporary perspective on the issues at hand.

The collective insights from the aforementioned studies unanimously affirm the beneficial impact of WCF on the English writing instruction of college students. However, when it comes to determining which type of error correction feedback is more efficacious, a more nuanced and detailed discussion is warranted.

Firstly, it's important to recognize that each form of WCF possesses its unique strengths and limitations. Educators must judiciously select and employ the most suitable types of error correction to effectively enhance their students' proficiency in English writing. Secondly, it is suggested that integrating a variety of WCF approaches for error correction could potentially yield enhanced outcomes within the realm of English writing instruction. By leveraging a multifaceted strategy, educators can harness the combined strengths of different feedback methods to foster a more effective learning environment. Ultimately, educators might also contemplate the integration of WCF with other pedagogical activities, including written languaging, to further optimize the effectiveness of English writing instruction. This holistic approach can synergize the benefits of diverse teaching strategies, thereby cultivating a more dynamic and comprehensive learning experience for students.

5. Discussion

5.1 Factors Affecting the Research Results

During the research process, it is crucial to consider some of the factors that influence the accuracy of the findings.

From the students' perspective, according to Zhan Xiaohai (2019), there is a preference among students for the form and content of WCF provided by the teachers, but it has little to do with individual differences. For example, students generally preferred teachers' direct WCF, i.e., not only marking the exact location of the error, but also correcting it, e.g. ... "three advices" (three pieces of advice) In contrast, students strongly dislike indirect WCF, which does not provide the exact location of the error, that is, without marking the mistake, the teacher offers only a hint about it by writing a sign in the margin to indicate that there is at least one mistake in this line, e.g. ... three advices ... * (* is the indication of the mistake). Luckily, students' preference is mostly unrelated to their personal differences. Hence, researchers conducting comparative experiments on different WCF types can preemptively manipulate this preference among participants to ensure they join the study with an unbiased mindset, ultimately leading to more reliable and authentic experimental outcomes.

According to Su Jianhong (2014b) [16], the impact of WCF is significantly affected not only by the subjects' ability to pay attention or the degree of attention but also by the depth of their attention. Besides, he also explored the factors affecting the subjects' ability to pay attention to errors and their level of awareness, which are the subjects' English level, their language analysis ability and

their thinking style.

In addition, the researcher's experimental steps, even the research environment and so on, can impact the experiment's outcomes.

5.2 Suggestions

The experimental design of these studies could be improved in several ways, despite the findings being credible.

The selection of research subjects requires attention. First, it is crucial to consider the English language proficiency of the subjects. Generalizations cannot be made as English majors may not all possess a high level of proficiency and non-English majors may not all have a low level of proficiency. So the selection criteria for study subjects should not be based on whether they are English majors, but rather on their level of English proficiency. For instance, we could administer two tests before the start of the study. One test would evaluate the subjects' fundamental English proficiency, while the other would assess their linguistic ability for the particular research project of this study. The purpose of the latter examination is primarily to eliminate the candidates who have already acquired the competence necessary for the research project at hand. Certainly, we could also employ certain reputable assessments to gauge the participants' fundamental grasp of the English language, such as their CET4 and CET6 grades. However, if the test-takers lack these scores, the initial examination must be carried out. Second, it is necessary to consider the thinking patterns of the participants, distinguishing between those with linear and non-linear thinking. Furthermore, the gender and the age of the participants should also be taken into account, as there are observed differences in thinking patterns between males and females, with females typically demonstrating greater proficiency in language learning.

The above studies show that the majority of previous investigations have focused either on the impact of a sole form of WCF on students' writing or compared the effects of numerous WCF types. Limited research has explored the combined effects of multiple WCF forms on the writing expertise of English college learners. Future research may consider combining direct WCF with metalinguistic WCF to examine their effects.

Additionally, it was observed that certain researchers incorporated other components into the research process, including engaging research participants in written language activities and self-verification exercises. The study findings further indicated that these supplementary elements facilitated the effectiveness of WCF in enhancing second language writing and bolstered English writing proficiency amongst students. Therefore, future studies could explore the advantages and disadvantages of combining these additional activities with various types of WCF to improve their application in second language writing teaching. It is essential to maintain a logical flow of information with causal connections between statements and avoid biased language. Additionally, technical term abbreviations should be explained when first used to enhance comprehensibility.

6. Conclusion

Each variety of WCF offers its own set of benefits and drawbacks, necessitating a thoughtful approach to their application in the educational context.

In the sphere of second language writing pedagogy, the deployment of various forms of WCF can engender a spectrum of educational outcomes, contingent upon the specific instructional program. Concurrently, the strategic fusion of diverse WCF modalities, when synergized with a broader array of educational initiatives, has the potential to manifest a variety of educational impacts. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Chinese academic landscape currently exhibits a scarcity of research delving into the influence of electronic feedback and reformulation techniques

on English writing instruction. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further exploration and investigation in this area.

This dissertation is anticipated to offer valuable insights for future academic endeavors, paving the way for more bountiful research outcomes. Also, it is designed to empower English educators with the knowledge to more adeptly apply these findings in their writing instruction practices, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of their teaching methodologies.

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