

EFL students' perceptions of and engagement with teachers' grammatical corrective feedback

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) for helping second language (L2) learners improve the accuracy of their writing. However, some studies have shown that learners often face difficulty understanding the WCF given and are not always aware of what they need to do with their teacher's feedback, mainly because they do not fully comprehend their own errors. The present pilot study examined the association between English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' grammatical WCF and learners' perceptions of and engagement with this feedback. Through the use of two qualitative surveys, one completed by teachers and the other by learners, it was revealed that teachers mostly provide direct, comprehensive feedback and that the majority of learners view this feedback as ineffective. Teachers' WCF may induce temporary noticing of errors, but it is not likely to promote L2 learning. This study has pedagogical implications for the second language classroom by informing language teachers about the kind of WCF learners expect to receive and benefit from.

Keywords: written corrective feedback (WCF); English as a foreign language (EFL); perception; engagement

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) for helping second language (L2) learners improve the accuracy

of their writing. Learners can use WCF to modify or reformulate a non-targetlike aspect of their output and also restructure their interlanguage. However, some studies have shown that learners may face difficulty comprehending the WCF provided, or may not utilize the WCF for their own benefit as intended by their teacher (e.g., Brown & Glover, 2005; Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Research suggests that L2 learners' perceptions of WCF can affect the occurrence of accuracy gains (Lee, 2008), and that affective engagement with feedback can be negatively influenced by disparities in teacher practices and student perceptions (Han & Hyland, 2015). Hence, this pilot study sought to explore the relationship between teachers' views and practices in correcting grammatical errors in students' English language compositions, and students' perceptions of and engagement with teachers' WCF. It is important that teachers consider learners' feedback-related perceptions when providing WCF (Han, 2017), since students' perceptions of WCF affect their engagement with it.

2. Literature review

Written corrective feedback (WCF) refers to “. . . any feedback provided to a learner, from any source, that contains evidence of learner error of language form” (Russell & Spada, 2006, p. 134). In the literature, the relative importance of WCF has been subject to considerable discussion. Debates on WCF were mainly fueled by Truscott (1996) who questioned the effectiveness of error correction as an instructional tool for second language (L2) writing. Truscott's paper “The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes,” published in 1996 did not end the era of error correction, but rather prompted research on the connection between WCF and language improvement. Ferris (1999, 2003) asserts that unambiguous and consistent WCF can lead to gains in learners' grammatical accuracy. Long (1996) claims that learners should be given information about ungrammatical language production (i.e., negative feedback) in order to facilitate L2 development. More recent research has largely confirmed the effectiveness of WCF and controlled studies demonstrate that feedback on specific linguistic aspects grants L2 writers an advantage over those receiving no feedback (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Daneshvar & Rahimi, 2014; Ellis et al., 2008; Kloss & Quintanilla, 2022; Shintani et al., 2014). Longitudinal studies also indicate that WCF over time can promote language accuracy (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002).

Corrective feedback is thought to be beneficial for L2 acquisition as it allows learners to pick up grammatical features that may be lost due to the discontinued access to learning standards (Ellis, 2009). WCF that attempts to mainly correct grammatical errors in L2 learners' writing is a common pedagogical strategy in L2 writing classrooms. The role of corrective feedback is grounded in

Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis. Noticing which is the fundamental sense of "being aware of something" (Schmidt, 1993, p. 211) is a subjective experience and is seen as an important condition for L2 acquisition (Schmidt 1990, 1993, 1995, 2001; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). L2 learners have to first notice the gap between what they are able to express in the L2 and what they wish to express in order to learn language structures. One way to enhance the learner's noticing of linguistic structures is through the provision of corrective feedback.

Written corrective feedback can be provided in an explicit or implicit form. The explicit form, direct WCF, is when the teacher marks the error and provides the student with the correct structure; the implicit form, indirect WCF, occurs when the teacher indicates that the student has made an error without providing the correct structure, leaving it up to the student to self-correct (Ellis, 2009). Studies comparing direct and indirect WCF strategies have shown that both are helpful to L2 writers for different reasons. Direct WCF might be more useful for learners at lower proficiency levels as they have quite restricted linguistic knowledge (Bakri, 2015; Bitchener, 2012). According to Ferris and Roberts (2001), students with higher levels of proficiency should be given more opportunities to correct their errors. When students are given direct feedback, they do not take the initiative to employ their own resources (Hosseiny, 2014; Swain, 1985). Actually, it is indirect feedback that helps students build up their form-focused knowledge and promote more self-learning (Westmacott, 2017), as it involves learners in guided learning and cognitive problem solving, an activity presumed to lead to acquisition (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005).

Another facet of WCF is that it can be provided in an unfocused or focused manner. According to Ellis (2009), unfocused feedback targets many or all error types, while focused feedback targets only one or a few error types, and ignores other errors. Unfocused feedback is considered to be a regular practice in writing instruction. Yet, if noticing and understanding are important for acquisition, as cognitive theories of second language acquisition (SLA) have claimed (e.g., Ellis, 2005; Schmidt, 1994), then focused feedback is better equipped to produce positive results. Sheen (2007) suggested that focused WCF would reduce the attentional strain on learners and hence facilitate the likelihood of becoming aware of a target structure, whereas unfocused WCF would increase the attentional load and thus reduce the probability of learners' awareness of a structure or structures. English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers tend to follow conventional feedback practices when correcting students' compositions. These include the provision of unfocused corrections and the use of a restricted range of WCF strategies, which often do not suit students' specific needs (Lee, 2011; Lee et al., 2016).

It is claimed that teachers are likely to dominate the feedback process while students play a passive role (Lee, 2011; Lee, et al., 2016). Yet, it is suggested that

“feedback can only be effective when the learner understands the feedback and is willing and able to act on it” (Price et al., 2010, p. 279). Some studies have shown that learners might not be aware of what they need to do with their teacher’s feedback as they do not fully comprehend their own errors. Students may face difficulty understanding the WCF given, or may not utilize the WCF for their own benefit as meant by their teacher (e.g., Brown & Glover, 2005; Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998; Zheng & Yu, 2018).

Research suggests that L2 learners’ perceptions about WCF can affect the acquisition of accuracy gains (Lee, 2008). Ellis (2010) claims that learning takes place if learners engage positively with feedback. He perceives learner engagement as consisting of a cognitive aspect (i.e., how learners attend to the corrective feedback they receive); a behavioral aspect (i.e., whether and how learners revise their written texts); and an affective aspect (i.e., the learners’ attitudinal response to the feedback). As noted by Han and Hyland (2015), learners’ affective engagement with feedback can be negatively impacted by disparities in teacher practices and student perceptions. They claim that if learners receive some feedback that they do not perceive as effective or desirable, they may not incorporate it into their next writing attempts or may not allot sufficient cognitive resources to it.

Two important themes emerge from the aforementioned studies: Teachers should consider learners’ feedback-related perceptions when providing WCF (Han, 2017), and students’ perceptions of WCF affect their engagement with it. It has also been established that engagement with WCF facilitates language acquisition and writing development (e.g. Han & Hyland, 2015; Sachs & Polio, 2007). Thus, this pilot study sought to qualitatively investigate the relationship between teachers’ views and practices in grammatically correcting students’ English language compositions, and in turn, students’ perceptions of and engagement with teachers’ WCF.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate the relationship between teachers’ views and practices in correcting grammatical errors in students’ English language compositions, and students’ perceptions of and engagement with teachers’ WCF. The following research question guided this investigation:

What is the relationship between teachers’ practices in correcting grammatical errors in students’ English language compositions (amount and type of feedback, revision, and feedback effectiveness) and students’ perceptions of and engagement with the feedback?

3.1. Participants

The study's participants consisted of 4 female, experienced (at least 10 years of teaching) EFL teachers at a large university, and 21 female, undergraduate students at the same university. All students were freshmen, aged between 18 and 25, and enrolled in a B2 (upper-intermediate) level EFL course. This is the university's most advanced compulsory English course geared toward improving English reading, writing, and other academic skills to enable students to function competently in the academic and professional world. The participants were contacted two weeks prior to the end of the semester. To avoid a conscious or unconscious influence of "social desirability," the students selected were not taught by the teachers who participated in the study.

3.2. Research tools

This qualitative study was conducted in the form of a survey, with data being gathered via two sets of questionnaires designed for teachers and students. The teacher questionnaire was mostly adapted from items in Lee's (2011) study, and comprised queries about views and practices related to grammatical correction of students' English language compositions. All questions were phrased in an open-ended form. The following queries were included:

1. How many grammatical errors do you correct? (a few, many, etc.)
2. How do you think your students feel about the number of errors that you correct?
3. What kind of feedback do you give? (correct errors, underline errors, etc.)
4. Do you think that the kind of feedback you give is helpful to your students? (they understand it, they will be able to apply it in their next composition, etc.),
5. What do you ask your students to do after they read the corrective feedback? (review of grammatical rules, grammar exercises, revise/rewrite the work, etc.)
6. What kind of corrective feedback do you think could be most helpful for your students?
7. If you could devote more time to teaching grammar throughout the semester, would your requirements of students differ?

The student questionnaire was adapted from Lee's (2008) study as well, and included questions about perceptions of and engagement with teachers' grammatical WCF. All questions were phrased in an open-ended manner. The following questions were included:

1. How many grammatical errors does your teacher correct? (a few, many, etc.)
2. How do you feel about the number of errors that your teacher corrects?
3. What kind of feedback does your teacher give? (corrects errors, underlines errors, etc.)
4. Do you think that the kind of feedback your teacher gives is helpful? (you understand it, you will be able to apply it in your next composition, etc.),
5. What does your teacher ask you to do after you read the corrective feedback? (review of grammatical rules, grammar exercises, revise/rewrite the work, etc.)
6. What do you do after you read the corrective feedback?
7. What kind of corrective feedback do you think could be most helpful for you?
8. What do you expect your teacher to do so that you learn from the corrective information you received?

3.3. Procedure

The teacher questionnaire was mailed to 6 EFL teachers, 4 of whom returned their completed questionnaires by mail. The student questionnaire was mailed to 28 EFL students and was completed by 21 students who returned it by mail. The data obtained from the surveys were organized by questions to allow looking across all respondents and their answers, in order to identify consistencies and differences. Data for each question was then divided into thematic categories. Within each category, the number of times a theme occurred was counted to provide an estimate of the themes' relative dominance. Finally, the content of each category was descriptively summarized, and selected quotes were included to capture the essence of the respondents' thoughts and feelings.

4. Results

4.1. Teachers

The data revealed, as displayed in Table 1, that 75% of the teachers provided direct, unfocused WCF. They felt that they needed to draw students' attention to every single error they made, although they acknowledged the drawbacks of such a practice. They realized it was unrealistic to expect students to consciously attend to all the corrections and be able to learn from them. One teacher indicated that she gives unfocused feedback, that is, correcting several, yet meaningful, errors. Also, this teacher did not invariably adhere to direct feedback, but rather shifted between direct and indirect WCF. All teachers transferred the responsibility for any sort of engagement with the feedback to the students. Students

were expected to read the feedback they received and try "to avoid making these mistakes again" and were occasionally asked "to do drill exercises." One teacher replied: "I ask them to review certain forms if I see that they keep repeating the same mistakes, or that they are of a certain kind."

Teachers were asked about the efficacy of their WCF and their requirements of students following the receipt of feedback. Three teachers responded that they doubted their practices led to student learning. They explained this situation by claiming that time constraints dictate less engagement with the teaching of grammar throughout the semester. One teacher pointed to students' individual differences and noted that "it depends on the student. If the student is serious and motivated to improve his/her language skills, he/she pays attention and tries to avoid the error in the next essay."

Table 1 Summary of teachers' responses

Questions	Teachers (%)	Response summary
How many grammatical errors do you correct?	75%	All
	25%	Several
How do you think your students feel about the number of errors that you correct?	75%	They probably think it's too much, and it is doubtful whether they will attend to all these corrections.
	25%	Students expect me to correct the major errors they make.
What kind of feedback do you give?	75%	Direct
	25%	Either direct or indirect
Do you think that the kind of feedback you give is helpful to your students?	75%	Probably not
	25%	It depends on the individual learner's motivation
What do you ask your students to do after they read the corrective feedback?	100%	Review certain grammatical forms; do drill exercises; avoid making these mistakes again.
		Not asking students to revise/rewrite their work.
What kind of corrective feedback do you think could be most helpful for your students?	100%	Correcting fewer errors and providing grammatical explanations and examples for each error.
If you could devote more time to teaching grammar throughout the semester, would your requirements of students differ?	75%	Ask students to attempt self-correction, and then discuss the errors in class.
	25%	Ask students to revise their compositions.
	50%	Ask students to undertake an analysis of their own errors in small groups, devise explanations, and share them with their classmates
	50%	Assign more grammatical drills

Another question pertained to the kind of corrective feedback teachers felt could be most helpful for their students. Teachers thought that correcting fewer grammatical errors in their students' compositions, and providing grammatical explanations and examples for the errors they corrected could be beneficial for students. Finally, teachers claimed that if they had had more time for teaching grammar

throughout the semester, they would have asked students to attempt self-correction, and then discuss the errors in class (75%); they would have told students to revise their essays (25%); and they would have asked students to undertake analysis of their own errors in small groups, devise explanations and share them with their classmates (50%), or assign more grammatical drills (50%).

4.2. Students

As shown in Table 2, respondents wrote that their teachers mostly provided direct, comprehensive WCF. The majority of learners disclosed that the sight of numerous corrections overwhelmed, confused, and discouraged them (91%), yet others felt it was the teacher's responsibility to correct all their errors, and appreciated the effort invested in the comprehensive WCF they received. Most learners (87%) wrote that their teacher had only asked them to read the feedback, and others (13%) stated that they were asked to "learn from the mistakes and try not to repeat them." No learner was asked to revise or rewrite their work.

The way students handled the feedback was to read and try to understand it (92%). Others (8%) noted that they tried to memorize the teacher's corrections "for next time." Twenty-eight percent of the respondents thought that their teachers' corrective feedback was helpful: "Yes, it led me to be aware [of] where I am making mistakes." The other 72% thought it was ineffective: "Most of the time it wasn't helpful. I learned mostly by talking and listening, also I learned from TV series;" "No, it didn't help me. I didn't know the rules and she expected us to know them."

Learners were asked what kind of corrective feedback they thought could be most helpful for them. Most respondents (81%) thought that teachers should correct only several errors, and in addition to providing the correct form, an explanation as to why the grammar is incorrect needs to be given. Others expressed similar opinions but felt that teachers should correct many of the errors made. In response to the question "What do you expect your teacher to do so that you learn from the corrective information you received?" most respondents (87%) replied that the teacher should provide further assistance: "If my teacher will write why I am wrong, I think that I will understand better;" "it will be nice to get one lesson that will include tips regarding tenses and special rules;" "if many made the same mistake, the teacher can review it in class;" and "give grammar exercises to practice at home." Some (8%) felt that a one-time shot at providing grammatical explanations does not suffice and suggested repeated explanations of recurrent errors over the course of the semester. Several students (5%) also expressed a need for explanations but believed that teachers should occasionally not correct the errors, and allow students to self-correct their compositions.

Table 2 Summary of students' responses

Questions	Students (%)	Response summary
How many grammatical errors does your teacher correct?	100%	Usually all grammatical errors
How do you feel about the number of errors that your teacher corrects?	91%	Overwhelmed, confused, discouraged
	9%	Appreciate teacher's attempt to relate to all errors
What kind of feedback does your teacher give?	100%	Mainly marks the error and provides the correct form
Do you think that the kind of feedback your teacher gives is helpful?	72%	No
	28%	Yes
What does your teacher ask you to do after you read the corrective feedback?	87%	To read the feedback and pay attention to the correct forms
	13%	To learn from the mistakes and try not to repeat them
	100%	Teacher did not ask to revise the work
What do you do after you read the corrective feedback?	92%	Try to understand it
	8%	Try to memorize it "for next time."
What kind of corrective feedback do you think could be most helpful for you?	81%	Correcting several errors, and providing grammatical explanations
	19%	Correcting many errors and giving grammatical explanations
What do you expect your teacher to do so that you learn from the corrective information you received?	87%	Give explanations and exercises
	8%	Repeat grammatical explanations for recurrent errors throughout the semester
	5%	Give explanations and occasionally allow self-correction

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of findings

This pilot study used a qualitative design to examine the association between EFL teachers' views and practices concerning WCF targeting grammar errors, and students' perceptions of and engagement with this type of WCF. The findings indicate that teachers mainly tend to give direct, comprehensive feedback; they usually do not provide grammatical explanations and exemplifications; and they do not require students to revise their written work. Most students feel overwhelmed with the number of errors being corrected; they feel the feedback they receive is insufficient; they expressed a need as well for their teachers to add explicit grammatical explanations.

5.2 Practical suggestions

To make WCF useful for students, teachers need to be aware of students' perceptions and preferences, and of the appropriate feedback types that should be given at various stages of students' linguistic development. Han (2017) states that "the attentional resources allocated to an error with WCF were influenced by students' beliefs about the type of WCF" (p. 140). Based on the findings, three suggestions can be provided: (1) Teachers' error correction should, at the initial stages, be supplemented with metalinguistic explanations; (2) Teachers should provide focused WC; and (3) Teachers should require revision of students' written work.

First, although WCF has been found to advance noticing in previous studies (Hanaoka & Izumi, 2012), it is still uncertain whether L2 learners really comprehend WCF. Hyland (1998) found that even though learners usually incorporated teachers' feedback and could correctly revise their essays, they sometimes integrated suggested corrections without understanding why and generated some revisions that were unconnected to the feedback received. It could be that the learners merely noticed the WCF but were not able to further process the information they attained from the negative feedback. If students are not aware of the underlying rules and usages of grammatical forms, they are unable to make generalizations and applications to other instances, and therefore will probably keep making the same mistakes.

Noticing and understanding are both degrees of "consciousness as awareness" (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1995, 2001), but understanding is the higher degree of awareness, which enables experiencing insights (Schmidt, 1993), recognizing patterns or rules (Schmidt, 1995), and forming generalizations across instances (Schmidt, 2012). For Schmidt (2012), "knowledge of rules and metalinguistic awareness of all kinds belong to this higher level of awareness" (p. 5). Thus, explaining and exemplifying the underlying grammatical rules, that is, metalinguistic explanation (ME) can provide more clarity and assist students in understanding and learning the target structure. Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that when learners understand the reasons why grammar structures are the way they are, their understanding (along with meaningful practice) helps them transcend the boundaries of a particular context. Additional evidence for the effectiveness of ME can be observed in a study by Shintani and Ellis (2013) where learners' self-reports indicated that those who received ME developed awareness of the rule and were able to use it when revising their original text. Metalinguistic explanation encouraged greater depth of processing on the part of the students as they had to apply it to their own errors.

Second, the study's findings demonstrated that most teachers tend to provide unfocused feedback. According to Lee (2019), research findings showing the benefits of focused WCF have not altered teachers' practices. Indeed, in many L2 contexts, it is customary to find teachers clinging to unfocused WCF. Sheen et al. (2009) compared the effects of focused and comprehensive (unfocused) WCF on several grammar items. The results indicated that focused WCF was more effective than comprehensive WCF in improving students' written accuracy. In the same vein, research by Bitchener (2008, 2012), Bitchener and Knoch (2008, 2009), and Sheen (2007), that included focused WCF on uses of the article system demonstrated the positive effect of a focused approach to WCF on students' written precision of the target structure. The study by Ellis et al. (2008) compared the effectiveness of focused and comprehensive WCF with

focused WCF given on two uses of the English article (i.e., definite and indefinite). The results showed the superiority of focused WCF in the long run. From a second language acquisition view, unfocused WCF poses a cognitive burden, “overloading students’ attentional capacity” (Sheen et al., 2009, p. 559). For students, especially developing L2 student writers, receiving papers filled with corrections is devastating and baffling (Sheen et al., 2009). For most L2 learners, focused WCF is more manageable, and as Lee (2019) argues, it “should be the way to go” (p. 524).

Finally, it was found that teachers do not require learners to revise or rewrite their work. The absence of a feedback-revision cycle may convey a view among many learners that they do not have anything to learn from their written work (Hyland, 2013). If learners are not required to respond to the received WCF, they may ignore it or attend to it only partially (Ellis, 2009; Liu & Brown, 2015). Revision is likely to promote noticing and learning, depending on the type of WCF given. If a student has received direct WCF, a revision would be likely to facilitate opportunities for mostly noticing, as the revision process comprises mechanical copying of the corrections. If a student has received indirect WCF, a revision would require the incorporation of feedback into the revised work (Swain, 1995). Since teachers in the current study provided mainly direct feedback, it seems that learners’ revisions could merely promote noticing. Had teachers provided indirect feedback, learners’ revisions could have promoted learning.

To encapsulate the preceding ideas, as presented in Figure 1, students should be given direct, focused WCF, supplemented with metalinguistic explanations. Teachers can later substitute direct feedback with indirect feedback. It is also beneficial for students to revise or rewrite their work. Such practices can push students to not only notice their errors but also learn from the information provided by teachers’ WCF.

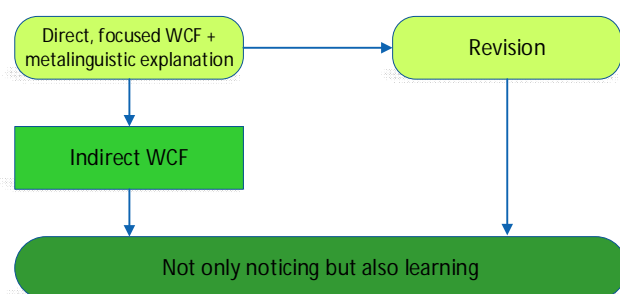


Figure 1 Practical recommendations on the provision of WCF

5.3. Pedagogical Implications, limitations, and future studies

This study can have pedagogical implications for the second language classroom by informing language teachers about the kind of feedback students expect to

receive, and about more appropriate manners of feedback provision. The readers should bear in mind that the study is limited due to small sample sizes, a lack of male participants, and the fact that it was undertaken in only one university. A future study with teacher and student interviews could be conducted to explore the reasons for teachers' practices and students' perceptions and preferences, as data for the current study was obtained only through questionnaires exploring teachers' WCF practices and students' views and engagement with WCF. In addition, since some learners in the current study found teachers' WCF helpful, a future study could look into how students' individual differences (e.g., study habits, proficiency, and motivation) affect their perceptions of and engagement with WCF.

6. Conclusion

This pilot study examined the association between EFL teachers' grammatical WCF and learners' perceptions of and engagement with this feedback. The study was conducted in the form of a survey, with data being gathered via two sets of questionnaires designed for teachers and students. The findings show that teachers mostly provide direct, comprehensive feedback, and usually do not add grammatical explanations. The majority of learners deem this kind of feedback ineffective. They favor less comprehensive corrections and express a need for grammatical clarifications. Teachers need to be aware of students' perceptions and preferences, and take these into account when providing WCF.

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