

Review of the Effectiveness of Written Corrective Feedback on Second Language Writing

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Abstract

In the field of second language writing, written corrective feedback (WCF) has been a controversial and hot topic. This paper reviewed studies from three perspectives: the efficacy of WCF, factors influencing the effectiveness of WCF which includes types of WCF, contextual factors, individual factors, and the teacher's belief about the WCF. Finally, this paper summarized the limitation of the previous studies and provides some suggestions for future research about WCF.

Keywords

Feedback; Written corrective feedback; Second language writing; Second language learning.

1. Introduction

Written corrective feedback refers to the responses to linguistic errors in learners' writing. And L2 teachers can use this tool to improve students' writing. In the field of second language writing, WCF was hotly debated recently. Truscott (1996) summarized some studies and found that WCF has negative effects on learners' grammatical accuracy in L2 writing. However, Ferris (1999) argued that a lot of studies should be conducted before abandoning WCF. This debate led researchers to examine the effectiveness of WCF in L2 writing by using empirical studies. Although the body of these empirical studies proved that WCF has a positive effect in general, its effect is mediated by many factors including the type of feedback, target structure, and so on. Therefore, this review aims to provide a synthesis of WCF studies and paid attention to the efficacy of WCF, factors influencing the effect of WCF, and teacher belief in the effects of WCF.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Effectiveness of Written Corrective Feedback

Some researchers argued that WCF should be abandoned because of its ineffectiveness. For instance, Truscott (1996) argued that WCF is ineffective and harmful as it could make learners avoid the use of complex sentences and use more simple sentences to decrease errors.

However, some researchers hold opposite views. Bitchener & Knoch (2010) investigated the role of written corrective feedback on advanced L2 learners. Participants formed three experimental groups and a control group. And participants were required to describe what was happening in a picture. The result showed that participants who received feedback perform better in the accuracy of grammar than participants who did not receive feedback. Wang & Liu (2012) investigated the effect of WCF on EFL learners' writing. They adopted second-year undergraduate English majors as participants. Students in the experimental group were provided with feedback and can make revisions. The findings showed that participants in the experimental group performs better in writing quality and accuracy than the control group. Niu & You (2020) examine the effect of WCF on learners' accuracy in writing. Chinese EFL learners were enrolled as participants. This study lasts over 16 weeks. Students in the experimental

group received indirect WCF and students in the control group received no feedback. Data analyses revealed that WCF can improve learners' writing accuracy.

2.2. Factors Influencing the Effects of Written Corrective Feedback

Previous studies examined the role of WCF in different situations and found that WCF has a relatively positive effect. But its efficacy can be mediated by a lot of factors. This paper reviewed the factors which can impact the efficacy of WCF including the type of feedback, contextual factors, and individual factors.

2.2.1. Type of Written Corrective Feedback

Ellis (2009) claimed that WCF can be divided into direct feedback, indirect feedback, and metalinguistic feedback. In the direct feedback, learners were given enough information to solve the complex language errors as they received the correct form. In the indirect feedback, learners were given information that they made an error but teachers did not correct it. Teachers can do this by underlining the error or other adoptable methods. In the metalinguistic feedback, learners were provided with the explicit comment about the nature of the errors. Different feedback forms lead to different effects, which encouraged researchers to explore which types and which combination of WCF can be more effective, however, the findings are inconsistent.

Most studies compared the differential effects between direct feedback and indirect feedback. For instance, Hashemnezhad & Mohammadnejad (2012) examined the role of WCF in learning. They conducted a 16-week study. Participants in the experimental group were provided with feedback and were encouraged to apply this feedback in their writing. The findings showed that learners can benefit more from direct feedback compared with indirect feedback. Beuningen et al. (2012) explore the differential effect of direct and indirect feedback on learners' writing accuracy. And the study found that both indirect and direct feedback have a short-term effect, but direct feedback also has long-term feedback.

Nemati et al. (2019) chose low-intermediate L2 writers as participants. Eighty-seven Iranian beginner learners were assigned to a direct feedback group, an indirect feedback group, and a control group. Participants were asked to finish the text summary task. The findings showed that WCF has a positive effect on learning implicit and explicit knowledge of simple past tense. And participants perform better in the direct feedback group in the learning of explicit knowledge of simple past tense than the other group. Bagheri & Rassaei (2022) examined the role of different types of WCF on learners' writing accuracy. This study enrolled Iranian EFL learners and include 2 experimental groups and a control group. In the beginning, all the participants took a pretest to assess their writing. In one of the experimental groups, participants were given direct feedback for their errors, in another experimental group teachers give participants indirect feedback and they were asked to correct their errors themselves. In the control group, participants were not provided with any feedback. The results indicated that both direct and indirect feedback can facilitate learners' accuracy in writing. In addition, direct feedback is more beneficial for learners than indirect feedback.

Some studies compared the different roles of metalinguistic feedback and direct feedback. Hou (2018) explored the different effects of direct feedback and metalinguistic feedback. The findings showed that metalinguistic has a better effect and can remain for a longer time. Bonilla et al. (2018) examined the potential of the role of WCF. Low-intermediate second language writers were chosen as participants and were randomly assigned into four experimental groups and a control group. Participants in the four experimental groups received direct corrections of grammatical errors, metalinguistic codes for grammatical errors, direct corrections of grammatical and nongrammatical errors, or metalinguistic codes for grammatical and nongrammatical errors separately. The results showed that both direct feedback and metalinguistic feedback can improve immediate grammatical and

nongrammatical accuracy, but only direct feedback has an evident long-term advantage. A possible reason could be that metalinguistic feedback requires more cognitive load which leads to learners cannot focus on target grammar than participants who received direct feedback.

On the contrary, some research found that there is no significant difference between different types of WCF. Vyatkina (2010) examined the role of WCF on learners writing accuracy. Beginning college-level learners of German were chosen as participants. Participants were assigned into three groups according to different feedback types. The researchers focused on the six error categories changes. Both the short-term effects and long-term changes were analyzed. And the results suggested that there is no significant statistical difference between the three groups. Learners' accuracy in redrafting was improved in all the groups.

Ellis et al. (2008) distinguished the focused corrective feedback and unfocused corrective feedback. In the first forms, the teachers only pointed out a single error type. However, in the second type, more than one error type will be focused on.

Chen et al. (2013) explored the different effects of focused and unfocused feedback. This study attempts to explore which type is more beneficial for the learning of the English subjunctive. The findings showed that both two types of feedback can facilitate language learners' learning, and there are no significant differences between these two types of feedback. Kassim & Ng (2014) compared the different effects of focused and unfocused feedback on the accuracy of using the preposition. ESL learners participated in this study for over 12 weeks. The study designed 3 groups including two treatment groups and a control group. In the two treatment groups, participants received unfocused feedback and focused feedback separately. The findings showed both focused and unfocused feedback can facilitate the use of prepositions, and there are no significant differences between the two types of feedback. Ekiert & Gennaro (2019) examined the effect of written corrective feedback on the learning of English articles. University English learners were chosen as participants. The findings suggested the focused WCF results that learners are more accurate in the target structure. That is focused WCF facilitates accurate use of articles more.

In conclusion, there is no consensus about which type of WCF is more effective, so future research needs further exploration.

2.2.2. Contextual Factors

Contextual factors consist of language environment, linguistic target, and so on.

Ellis (2010) argued that contextual variables include macro factors which are relative to the environment where the learning happens. Foreign language and second language settings are the most common macro environment. Kang & Han (2015) conducted a meta-analysis to assess the effectiveness of WCF. The results showed that there are significant differences between learners' performance in a different study settings. The WCF effect is more effective in the second language setting than in the foreign language setting. That is second language environment is more beneficial than a foreign language environment.

The target language structure can mediate the role of WCF. Ellis et al. (2008) found that WCF can improve the learning of English definite and indefinite articles significantly. However, Shintani et al. (2014) conclude different results and explored the role of WCF in the learning of two different grammatical structures. The indefinite articles and hypothetical conditional were adopted as the target structure. University English learners in Japan were enrolled as participants. The findings showed that WCF can influence learners' use of hypothetical conditional significantly and positively. But it cannot influence the use of the indefinite article. Frear & Chiu (2015) explored the efficacy of WCF on learners' total accurate use of weak verbs. Taiwanese college students were enrolled as participants. This study adopted a quasi-experimental study. Students in the experimental group were provided with WCF and students in the control group received no feedback. The findings suggested that learners in the

experimental groups performed better than the learners in the control group in both the post-test and delayed post-test. Suzuki et al. (2019) investigate the role of WCF on 88 Japanese university learners' writing. The findings showed that WCF has a significant effect on past perfect tense. But it cannot improve learners' accuracy of the indefinite article.

2.2.3. Individual Factors

Recent research attempt to explore how individual differences can mediate the effects of WCF. Shintani & Ellis (2015) examined how the role of language analytical ability which is an individual difference factor. They explored how the language analytical ability mediates learners' accurate use of target grammar structure: past hypothetical conditional and indefinite articles in their writing. The results showed that WCF is more beneficial for learners with higher language analytical ability. Benson & DeKeyser (2019) also examined the role of language-analytic ability in mediating the effects of WCF on learners' accurate use of verb tense. The results showed that the language-analytic ability of L2 learners' can influence the effects of WCF. Stefanou & Révész (2015) also examined the effectiveness of WCF concerning individual differences. And the study found that learners who have better grammatical sensitivity and metalinguage knowledge tend to gain more from direct feedback. Han (2017) examined how the learners' beliefs in relation to learners' engagement with WCF. Six Chinese EFL university students were enrolled as participants. This study collected data from interviews, and reflective accounts, retrospective verbal reports. The results indicated that learners' beliefs were mediated to influence learners' engagement with WCF. Mahfoodh (2017) attempted to explore how the emotional response of learners mediates the effects of WCF. Think-aloud protocols, semi-structured interviews, and learners' writing were collected to analyze. The findings showed that learners' emotional responses could mediate the effects of WCF which include dissatisfaction, disappointment, surprise, happiness, and so on. Because these emotional responses can impact the understanding and use of teachers' feedback. Zheng & Yu (2018) explored how learners' proficiency mediates the effect of WCF. They focused on the engagement with WCF of lower-proficiency students. And the results indicated that participants have relatively positive affective engagement, but the engagement is not necessary for accuracy. And the results also showed that lower proficiency harms learners' understanding and engagement of teachers' WCF. Li & Rosha (2019) investigated the connection between the efficacy of different types of WCF and working memory. Participants were required to finish the working memory test and writing tasks. The data shows that complex working memory tests can predict the effectiveness of metalinguistic feedback and direct feedback positively. And short-term memory can predict direct feedback negatively.

2.3. Teacher Belief on Effects of WCF

Many researchers explored how the teachers' beliefs about feedback influence the effect of WCF. For example, Fallah & Nazari (2019) examined how the teachers' beliefs mediate the role of corrective feedback. This study enrolled experienced and novice second language teachers. All the teachers were required to finish a questionnaire. And then the researchers interview 10 teachers, with five teachers in each group. The questionnaire and the interview were made to learn teachers' beliefs about their CF-related cognitions. The findings showed that experienced teachers are more likely to use peer and delayed feedback, while novice teachers tend to use more immediate feedback.

3. Conclusion

This paper reviewed the studies which are about the effectiveness of WCF in L2 writing. In the last decades, the efficacy of WCF is a hot topic, and many studies focused on the studies. However, these studies have some limitations. Firstly, most studies chose one language item as

the target grammar structure, which is the article. More grammar structures showed be explored in future studies. And most studies adopted the short-term design, so researchers could prolong the experimental period to explore the long-term effects. Finally, many factors can mediate the effects of WCF, so in the future, researchers should examine the effects of WCF from multi-dimensions. In conclusion, WCF is an important and controversial research topic, researchers should conduct more studies based on the current research and further expand the research scope.

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