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The Impact of Written Corrective Feedback on Enhancing Second Language Writing Skills: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

This review explores the dynamic landscape of written corrective feedback (WCF) in the context of second language (L2) writing, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of its influence on language proficiency. Examining various typologies of WCF, including direct and indirect approaches, as well as focused, unfocused, and comprehensive strategies, the paper navigates through the theoretical frameworks guiding their application in L2 writing development. A key focus is on the frequency of WCF and its nuanced effects on learners' writing performance. By synthesizing empirical studies, the review elucidates the short-term and long-term impacts of corrective feedback on aspects such as accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Striking a balance between the amount and timing of corrective interventions emerges as crucial in optimizing the efficacy of WCF. The review also delves into the interplay between learner factors—such as proficiency level, motivation, and individual differences—and the reception and integration of corrective feedback. Understanding how these factors shape the impact of WCF contributes to tailoring instructional strategies to meet diverse learner needs. In conclusion, the paper offers practical insights for educators, highlighting the need for targeted WCF interventions aligned with learners' proficiency levels and motivational dynamics. By providing a nuanced exploration of WCF in L2 writing, this comprehensive review informs both research agendas and instructional practices, contributing to the ongoing enhancement of second language education.

Keywords: *Feedback, Written Corrective Feedback, Second Language Writing, Second Language Learning*

A. Introduction

The development of second language (L2) writing skills is a crucial aspect of foreign language learning. One key element that consistently captures the attention of researchers and language educators is the use of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF). WCF is a pedagogical strategy commonly employed to assist second language learners in rectifying errors in their writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the impact of written corrective feedback on enhancing second language writing skills. 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.

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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.

Previous studies, as noted by Truscott (1996) and Ferris (2010), indicate that WCF has varied effects on the development of second language writing skills. However, the diversity in approaches, types of feedback, and frequencies creates complexity in understanding its overall influence (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Hence, this study will engage in an in-depth exploration of the various WCF methods employed, concurrently delving into the theoretical underpinnings.

The primary objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive review of the impact of WCF on the development of second language writing skills. By examining previous research, we can identify trends, knowledge gaps, and unresolved research questions in the literature. Consequently, this study is expected to make a significant contribution to both practical and theoretical understanding in the context of second language learning. It emphasizes the relevance and urgency of this research in supporting the effective development of second language writing skills.

B. Methods

The research methodology adopted for this study encompasses a thorough exploration of the impact of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) on second language writing skills. The investigation unfolds in a systematic manner, beginning with an extensive literature review. Scholarly articles, books, and relevant publications are systematically reviewed, prioritizing those that encapsulate diverse second language (L2) contexts, learner profiles, and WCF methodologies. The findings extracted from this literature are then meticulously analyzed and synthesized to discern patterns, trends, and research gaps.

The study employs specific selection criteria for inclusivity and exclusivity. Inclusion criteria encompass studies published in peer-reviewed journals, those directly addressing the impact of WCF on second language writing skills, and studies employing various WCF types across different proficiency levels. Conversely, exclusion criteria filter out studies not written in English or those not directly related to the impact of WCF on L2 writing. To systematically gather pertinent information from the selected studies, a standardized data extraction form is developed. This form is utilized to extract key data points such as study design, participant characteristics, WCF methods employed, and key findings related to the impact on L2 writing skills. The next phase involves data synthesis, where studies are categorized based on key variables such as WCF types, frequency, learner characteristics, and proficiency levels. Findings are then summarized and compared to identify overarching themes and patterns. Variations in results and potential factors influencing the effectiveness of WCF are also critically analyzed.

A crucial step in the methodology is the quality assessment of each selected study. Established criteria for assessing research quality in the field are employed, taking into consideration factors such as sample size, research design, and statistical analyses to determine the overall quality of evidence. If a sufficient number of comparable studies are identified, a meta-analysis is conducted. This involves quantitatively assessing the overall impact of WCF on L2 writing skills using statistical techniques to calculate effect sizes and assess heterogeneity across studies. Ethical considerations guide the study throughout the research process, ensuring compliance with ethical standards in data extraction, analysis, and reporting. Respect for copyright and intellectual property rights is maintained when citing and reproducing content from selected studies. The research findings are compiled into a comprehensive review, presenting a detailed synthesis of the literature, key themes, and recommendations for future

research and pedagogical practices. Through the meticulous application of this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the impact of WCF on enhancing second language writing skills.

C. Findings and Discussion

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. 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.

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 underling 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.

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.

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 metalanguage 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.

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.

D. 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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