The Effect of Written Corrective Feedback in Second Language Writing

Mansoureh Sajjadi

Department of English, Abadeh Branch, Islamic Azad University Abadeh, Iran
Mansourehh.Sajjadi@yahoo.com

Farzaneh Khabbazi

Department of English, Gheshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gheshm, Iran

Seyedeh Yasamin Sajjadi

Tehran University

Abstract: *Over the past decades, substantial attention has been turned to written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language writing (L2). One of the questions which has been posed is the appropriateness of CF use in L2writing. In academic settings, scholars describe how WCF is used in the classroom. However, many of these claims of teacher practice have no research base, since few studies have actually asked teachers what place WCF has in their writing classroom (Ferris, et al., in press/2011a; Ferris, et al., in press/2011b; Hyland, 2003; Lee, 2004). This lack of information from teachers about their WCF practices is problematic. Understanding teacher perspectives on corrective feedback is an essential part in understanding the place of WCF in L2 writing pedagogy. Accordingly, this article reports on a study that asks two fundamental research questions: (a) To what extent do current L2 writing teachers provide WCF? and (b) What determines whether or not teachers choose to provide WCF? These questions were answered by means of a survey completed by 105 L2 writing practitioners in 29 different cities. Results suggest that WCF is commonly practiced in L2 pedagogy by experienced and well-educated L2 teachers for sound pedagogical reasons.*

Keywords: *error correction, written corrective feedback, L2 writing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Corrective feedback has been practiced for such a long time that can arguably be linked to almost everything we learn (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). According to Russell and Spada (2006), in language learning "the term corrective feedback [refers] to any feedback provided to a learner, from any source, which contains evidence of learner error of language form" (p. 134). The value of such feedback in second language (L2) writing has been debated in the literature for several decades. Theorists have attempted to answer many questions related to written corrective feedback (WCF) in L2 writing. For instance: Isit helpful or harmful to students? (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2007; Truscott, 1996, 2007; Zamel 1985); Should it begiven to students at all proficiency levels, or only at beginning levels? (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a; Kepner, 1991); Should WCF be given to students explicitly or implicitly? (Bitchener, Cameron, &Young, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2002; Lalande, 1984); Should it be given directly or indirectly? (Ferris, 1997, 2001, 2006; Ferris, & Roberts, 2001; Ellis, 1998; Lee, 2004; Sheen, Wright, &Moldawa, 2009); Should all written errors be marked or only select errors? (Bitchener et al., 2005; Ellis,)

While the literature on the use of WCF in L2 writing is extensive (e.g. Bitchener, 2008, Ferris, 2003; Storch, 2010), one important question remains unanswered: What are the current WCF beliefs, theories, and practices supported by writing teachers in the classroom? Unfortunately, practitioner perspectives have been fundamentally absent in the published literature. Kumaravadivelu (1994) argued that in a "post method condition" it is impossible for any one theory or stance on language teaching? indeed, even theories on the pedagogical role of WCF? To account for everything language teachers encounter in their classrooms day to day (p. 30). They must be free to make autonomous choices and develop, in essence, their own approach to language teaching, or what Kumaravadivelu refers to as the development of their own "principled pragmatism" (p. 30). This pragmatism is

informed by teachers' own learning experiences, the influences of their professional training, their own observations of what works and what does not work for their students, and even their own intuition. Kumaravadivelu is not alone in his support of teacher autonomy. Richards (1998) notes that the development of teaching skills should not be seen as "the mastery of general principles and theories that have been determined by others," but rather as "the acquisition of teaching expertise [in a] process that involves the teacher in actively constructing a personal and workable theory of teaching (p. 65).Similarly, Nation and Macalister (2010) posit that what teachers do in their classrooms will "be determined by what they believe," and that "the old-fashioned notion that a teacher's role is to transmit knowledge from the curriculum to the learners has been replaced by recognition that teachers have complex mental lives that determine what and how teachers teach" (p. 176).Even Truscott (1999), who has published extensively against the use of WCF1 in the classroom, has acknowledged that "teachers must constantly make decisions about what to do ?and what not to do?

Review of Literature

The published research relative to the role of WCF in the L2 classroom is substantial and growing. It is, however, insufficient if used as the sole source to inform the practice of WCF in language learning. The literature on WCF demonstrates inconsistencies in findings and pedagogical advice. For instance, Zamel (1985) noted that as early as 1980, Hendrickson observed that "current research tells us very little about ESL teachers' responses to student writing. We know that teachers respond imprecisely and inconsistently to errors" (p. 84).

Yet, little progress in this area is evidenced. As Ferris (2004) states, even after decades of research, publication, and debate on the matter, "we are virtually at Square One, as the existing research base is incomplete and inconsistent, and it would certainly be premature to formulate any conclusions about this topic"(p. 49).

1.1. Inconsistent and Contradictory Opinions about WCF

Despite over two decades of research and writing, inconsistencies in the research still make it unclear what role WCF should play in the language classroom. Some have stepped forward in strong support of WCF (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a, 2009b; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Erlam, & Loewen, 2006; Evans et al., 2010; Ferris, 1997; Ferris &Roberts, 2001, 2004; Hartshorn et al., 2010; Lalande, 1984; Polio & Sachs, 2007; Sheen, 2007). Others have argued against it for various reasons (Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, &S hortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007; Zamel, 1985). Some researchers have neither supported nor opposed WCF, but have demanded instead careful reanalysis of the published studies, arguing that the variations and inconsistencies in them negate the possibility of reaching any real conclusions on the matter (Bruton, 2009; Ferris, 2004; Guénette, 2007; Hyland &Hyland, 2002; Russell & Spada, 2006).

1.2. Cited References for the Teachers' Voice

When focusing specifically on the practices and beliefs of practitioners concerning WCF, the published findings are inconsistent and, in some cases, as contradictory as the findings about WCF generally. A review of L2-related literature shows that very few studies provide much insight into what teachers actually say about their WCF practices. Furthermore, the findings that are presented have vast discrepancies. For example, some studies indicate that teachers are overly concerned about grammar (Ferris &Roberts, 2001; mHyland & Hyland, 2002; Robb et al., 1986; Zamel, 1985), while another study implies that they are not (Sheen, 2007).

Furthermore, some studies suggest that teachers are not capable of giving correct grammatical feedback (Lee, 2004; Truscott, 1996), yet another found that they are extremely accurate (Ferris, 2006). Some theorists have argued that teachers take into account the needs and desires of their students when considering whether and how to give WCF (Ferris, 2006; Ferris, Pezone, Tade, &Tinti,1997; Goldstein &Conrad, 1990; Hyland, F., 1998;Hyland &Hyland, 2006; Lee, 2004), while others have claimed that teachers are so insensitive to student needs that students are incapable of making sense of the feedback given them (Cohen &Robbins, 1976; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Lee, 1997, 2004; Truscott, 1996). What is certain is that their accounts are conflicting and incomplete.

Most of the evidence cited in the literature about teachers comes from informal observations. Surprisingly few statements about the beliefs and practices of teachers come from actually asking the

teachers themselves. Of the statements that do, even fewer are from studies published with the specific intent to learn about WCF by questioning teachers.

Many similar comments can be found in L2 writing literature; they are at best unsubstantiated assumptions of the theorists (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2004; Guénette, 2007; Hyland &Hyland, 2002; Kepner, 1991; Sheen, 2007).

Of these five studies, two have limited sample sizes, but offer valuable insights nonetheless (Ferris, 2006; Hyland, 2003). In her investigation of the efficacy of error feedback, Ferris (2006) also considers the strategies teachers use to provide feedback. She does this by interviewing three L2 writing teachers. One of her conclusions from this research is the "significance of examining what teachers actually do when giving error feedback" (p. 98). Hyland (2003) also uses a case study approach by looking at the feedback given by two academic writing teachers to six students over a complete course. She found that, despite teachers' claims to be focused on genre issues and either process or whole writing, much of their feedback "focused on the formal aspects of the students' texts" (p. 222).

2. THE STUDY

The essential absence of the teacher's voice in the WCF literature must be considered problematic because it makes it fundamentally impossible to draw any conclusions from the published findings on this matter. In addition, even when theories of teaching are unified, no one theory of teaching, or view on a pedagogical technique, is sufficient for all that teachers face in their classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 1994).

2.1. Aims of the Study

The study was designed to answer two related questions: (a) to what extent do current L2 writing teachers provide WCF? And (b) what determines whether or not practitioners choose to provide WCF?

2.2. Instrument

In order to clarify what L2 writing teachers are doing with WCF in their classes and why, we determined to seek input from a broad range of English language teachers by means of survey that could be distributed widely to L2 writing teachers.

With our research questions as guides, we constructed a survey consisting of 24 questions. Each item on the survey was designed to probe the research questions from various perspectives. The final survey consisted of four sections under the following headings:

"Background information" (8 questions), "Do you error correct?" (4 questions), "How do you error correct?" (6 questions), and "Why do you or don't you error correct?" (6 questions).

2.3. Contact Lists

Several additional strategic decisions had to be made when selecting recipients for the survey, the most important of which was more a question of representation than of quantity. Since our intent was to gather data from as many qualified respondents as possible, no attempt was made to randomize recipients or limit distribution to particular subpopulations. In order to capture a broad sample of WCF practices and philosophies, the survey's reach needed to extend beyond personally known colleagues. This resulted in a compilation of a master mailing list from four sources: (a) known L2 writing scholars for whom had email contacts, (b) personal professional contacts, (c) teachers or researchers whose contact information had been published by scholarly associations, and (d) names extracted from ESL/EFL program websites.

2.4. Participants

Demographic data generated in the survey gave us valuable insight into the characteristics and qualifications of those writing teachers who responded to the survey. The average respondent speaks English as a second language and has earned a master's degree in TESOL. In addition, the average respondent is currently teaching ESL for many years, and has been teaching L2 writing for quite a long time. In sum, the WCF philosophies reflected in the responses to the survey come from educators who are well informed by both formal training and extensive experience in L2 writing.

2.5. Analysis

Responses to all but 3 of the 24 survey questions were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS software. The results are primarily descriptive. The three open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns and common themes among the participants' responses. This qualitative analysis examined data according to participants' years of experience teaching L2 writing.

In order to make the analysis of the qualitative data as trustworthy as possible, the process of referential adequacy was employed (Eisner, 1975; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1997; Tierney, 1992). This process involves identifying a portion of data to be archived but not analyzed. The researcher then conducts a data analysis on the remaining data to develop preliminary findings. Once the data are analyzed, the archived data are used to verify the findings (Eisner, 1975).

In this study, the process involved three steps. First, a researcher (R1) read responses to the question "I do/do not error correct because . . ." from all participants with 1-2, 11-14, and 25 or more years of teaching L2 writing experience (n = 429). These responses constituted 42% of the total data set2. In this process, R1 created categories for the responses, such as "Students need it," "It helps improve writing." or "Students expect it." In the second step, all three researchers reviewed and refined the categories. This was done by comparing the category descriptors to sample responses taken from the 429 responses. Finally, a second researcher (R2) read all 1,031 responses and assigned each response to a category. R2 found that the categories created in steps 1 and 2 adequately described the majority of all responses. An "other" category was included to account for the few (10%) responses that did not fall within the main categories. It should also be noted that often a response from a participant was assigned to multiple categories.

3. RESULTS

Given the extensive data collected in this study, only the most pervasive patterns in participant responses are presented. As noted, every effort has been made to accurately describe patterns reflected in the survey results.

3.1. Research Question 1: Do L2 Writing Teachers Correct Errors?

In a word, yes; current teachers do correct errors. However, the purpose of our first research question was notonly to identify how pervasive the practice of WCF is among current ESL/EFL writing teachers, but also to address the intricacies of the matter as well. In order to accomplish this, we asked five related questions: (1)

"Typically, do you provide your writing students with at least some error correction?" (2) "Typically, I (do/do not) provide error correction to my students because . . . ," (3) "Considering all the writing your students submit, what percentage gets error corrected?" (4) "What percentage of your time is spent on feedback on the linguistic accuracy of your student writing?" and (5) "What percentage of your time is spent on feedback on the rhetorical features of your student writing?" The results of each question are discussed below. It should be again noted that because not all 105participants answered all survey questions, each question has a different number of respondents.

At first glance, questions (1) and (2) may appear to be asking the same thing; they do not. Question one asked teachers if they typically provide "at least some" error correction, whereas the second question asked if teachers "typically provide" error correction. The responses to both questions were overwhelmingly positive in favor of WCF. On the first question, 99% of all respondents (1,053) indicated that they do provide at least some error correction on student writing. Only 1% (10) said that they never provide any error correction.

Responses to question two were also predominantly positive in favor of WCF, with 92% of the respondents (945) indicating that error correction is typically part of what they do as L2 writing teachers. Only 8% of the respondents (86) indicated that they typically do not include error correction as part of their writing instruction. Responses to the third question confirmed and illuminated the positive response given in the first two questions.

On average, the 982 teachers who responded to question 3 reported providing some form of error correction on over 66% of the writing they receive from students. The 903 teachers who completed questions 4 and 5 indicated that, on average, over 44% of their time is spent providing feedback on linguistic accuracy, and 61% of their time3 is spent providing feedback on content and rhetorical features of their students' writing.

3.2. Research Question 2: What Determines Whether or Not Practitioners Choose to Provide WCF?

Understanding that current L2 writing teachers overwhelmingly do include written corrective feedback as part of their teaching is informative and important to know, especially in light of the dearth of data described earlier.

However, an even more interesting question to ask is why they provide this feedback. In an effort to understand the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of this practice, five additional questions were asked in three different formats: (1) an open-ended sentence completion question: "I typically do/do not error correct because..."; (2) two Likert scale questions: "My writing students effectively apply the error correction I provide"; and "Generally, how effective is the practice of error correction on improving the overall accuracy of student writing?", and (3) two item-ranking questions: "What factors influence your error correction practices most?" and "What do your writing students struggle with the most?"

The open-ended question asking teachers to complete the sentence "I typically do/do not error correct because..." was extremely informative, and provided rich, qualitative data supporting teachers' reasons for their WCF practices. Because much of the debate on WCF in the literature focuses on the appropriateness of providing WCF, the results to this question are presented from contrasting perspectives. We do this by comparing the reasons why some few teachers (8%) choose not to provide WCF with the reasons that most teachers (92%) give for including WCF as part of their L2 writing teaching.

We begin with the reasons some practitioners give for not providing WCF. To put this in perspective, it may be useful first to remember that these responses represent only 8% of all the survey respondents. Also, we should note that there were no meaningful differences between the background and experience of those indicating that they do correct errors and those indicating that they do not correct errors. For example, analysis of variance showed that no significant differences emerged based on level of education ($p = .702$, $\eta^2 < .001$), years of experience as an L2 writing teacher ($p = .682$, $\eta^2 < .001$), whether or not the teacher was a native speaker of English ($p = .369$, $\eta^2 < .001$), or the specific nature of the teacher's training (e.g., TESOL, $p = .708$, $\eta^2 < .001$; Applied Linguistics, $p = .308$, $\eta^2 = .001$; Education, $p = .930$, $\eta^2 < .001$; Writing Specialization, $p = .093$, $\eta^2 = .002$). The difference in teaching contexts, however (i.e., ESL or EFL), proved to be statistically significant ($p = .010$), although the negligible effect size ($\eta^2 = .006$) renders this difference inconsequential.

4. DISCUSSION

This strong and wide response to the survey suggests at least two preliminary conclusions. First, WCF is a topic of keen interest to teachers. Responses flooded in almost immediately after the survey was launched. In addition, one question on the survey asked participants if they would be interested in receiving a summary of the survey results; over 85% of the respondents requested this summary. The second insight that can be gained from this strong response is that these results are likely indicative of the general L2 writing practitioner population. While no effort was taken to target specific populations, the generally consistent responses from this sampling of L2 practitioners suggests some clear patterns of WCF practice.

The most obvious pattern observed in this research is that WCF is indeed used extensively in L2 writing by extremely experienced teachers. The average years of ESL/EFL teaching experience was slightly more than 16 years, with a median of 16 and a mode of 21 years of teaching ESL/EFL. Approximately 99% of the L2practitioners surveyed use some form of WCF to a degree. Those who typically use WCF as part of their teaching represented 92% of the respondents. This response should not be surprising given the fact that respondents identified "grammatical errors" as their students' greatest single struggle. The 86 participants (8%) who said that they do not use WCF in any form

were conspicuous by their limited numbers. In this regard, Truscott's (1996) assumption seems accurate, "In L2 writing courses, grammar correction is something of an institution. Nearly all L2 writing teachers do it in one form or another" (p. 327).

Attempts to define patterns showing why practitioners do or do not provide WCF were addressed from various perspectives. The use of the open-ended sentence completion question, "I typically error-correct my students' writing because . . .", proved to be invaluable. A comparison of the responses to this question by those who do and those who do not use WCF offers a mirror image of each other. Non-correctors say they do not use WCF because "content, rhetoric and organization matter most." On this point, those who do use WCF counter with the argument that "language matters too." When non-correctors say that "students should be responsible to correct their own errors," those who use WCF are adamant that it is a teachers' responsibility to provide corrective feedback. "How," they ask, "are students supposed to know what is erroneous or not?" The no correctors' position that "WCF is not effective" is countered with a resounding "WCF helps students." A particularly important point here is that the many practitioners who said that WCF helps students offered reasons that are based in second language acquisition (SLA) research. For instance, WCF helps students notice or be aware of language patterns, teaches them how to self-correct, and provides them with good language models.

While those who use WCF are part of a strong majority, an important insight from the two scaled questions must be carefully considered. When asked to scale how effective WCF was for students, participants who said that they typically use WCF were fairly reserved in their responses. On average, they indicated that they think WCF is only "somewhat" effective in helping students improve their linguistic accuracy.

They indicated that students "somewhat effectively" apply the WCF provided. While both responses were well positioned on the positive side of the scale, there clearly is some reservation. This may be an indication that these practitioners understand the potential of WCF, but they recognize that it may be ineffective if the students are not motivated enough to take adequate advantage of the WCF they receive. This observation seems to be confirmed by open-ended question responses. Many respondents said such things as "it is one way to help," "it helps to some degree," and "if students are motivated, it helps."

Finally, an observation cited earlier by Ferris et al. (in press/2011b) seems applicable here. They note that the teachers in their study "sincerely want their students' writing to improve to its fullest potential" and they want the time and effort they spend on providing feedback "for student writers to be well spent" (p. 19). The patterns observed in the written responses in this study seem to confirm these same sentiments. The overwhelming majority of teachers' comments on open-ended questions indicated that they provided feedback because they think students need it, and that WCF is an effective pedagogical practice.

5. CONCLUSION

We began this discussion by referencing Kumarivadivelu's (1994) post method condition in which teachers "theorize from practice and practice what they theorize" as an alternative to traditional methods ? what he calls "principled pragmatism" (p. 27). He notes that one way teachers can practice principled pragmatism is to rely on what Prabhu (1990) calls a "sense of plausibility" (p. 31). By this, Prabhu means teachers rely on their "subjective understanding of the teaching that they do. Teachers need to operate with some personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning with a notion of causation that has a measure of credibility for them" (p. 172).

Findings from this study are helpful in several ways. First they have considerably augmented the limited, extant research on teachers' WCF practices. In addition, this study shows that current L2 writing teachers' pragmatism suggests that corrective feedback has an impact on what their learners achieve-that there is causation between WCF and greater linguistic accuracy.

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