

Implementing written corrective feedback research into practice in a Japanese EFL University writing class. Part 1: in creating a situated pedagogy - initial discovery, application and progress.

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1. Introduction

Providing written corrective feedback (WCF), despite being considered by most EFL teachers to be one of the most time-consuming parts of their jobs, is often unclear as to its efficacy in improving written linguistic accuracy. After giving corrective feedback there is often no change between the first and second drafts and it surely prompts us, as teachers, to question whether students hear or understand the feedback they receive.

So with all the time spent correcting student L2 writing a rethink is needed as to how that time could be more efficiently spent. Lambert [1] (2015) asserts that WCF is important because: it matches students' goals; it embodies active learning due to the time required for engagement with it; it is both expected and wanted by students, and expected to be provided by teachers; and written accuracy is more important than its spoken counterpart, because spoken errors are more readily tolerated.

The aim of this first paper is to research WCF to date, and inform and provide ideas and techniques for the classroom to improve its efficacy and in turn improve students' written linguistic accuracy adding to overall L2 development. These ideas will be implemented and reviewed in the teaching context of once-weekly Japanese university EFL writing classes, and suggestions for adaptations and improvements will be made. It is hoped that in the near future a second paper can be written providing a further account of the techniques utilized with the provision of actual data relating to their possible efficacy in terms of error reduction.

To give a background to subsequent descriptions of pedagogical techniques employed in the Spring 2019 semester, a review of the WCF literature follows. Descriptions of the techniques will be outlined followed by an evaluation of their stand alone and complimentary efficacy addressing the issues raised by a student survey, and future improvements that could be made in the situated pedagogy of a Japanese university EFL writing context. Here a situated pedagogy refers to teaching practices that “unite one’s personal theory of practice with the sociocultural, institutionalised and political particulars of a learning environment” ([2]Lochland, 2013). In other words, honing and adapting teaching ideas from a western pedagogy in a Japanese EFL context.

2. An overview of WCF in the literature

The past few decades have seen a proliferation of literature on WCF expand with some consistent central themes evolving. Perhaps the main one of these is whether or not written WCF should be

provided in L2 writing contexts at all ([3]Truscott, 1996). This consequently has resulted in research trying to ascertain a single most effective type of WCF. These methods that are documented in the literature are situated in both cognitive and social cultural theory of mind perspectives on WCF for L2 development, and span direct and indirect, and focused or unfocused WCF.

2.1 Direct versus indirect corrective feedback

Direct feedback corrections are reformulated and edited into the text by a teacher; with indirect feedback, the teacher identifies the location of the errors which cognitively engages learners to attempt self-correction and produce the correct language. Indirect feedback is further differentiated by use of a code carrying metalinguistic information about a specific error, or feedback that is uncoded and uses circling or underlining of text containing errors to draw it to the attention of the learner ([4]Ferris & Roberts, 2001; [5]Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Thus far, there have been no conclusive results to define the effects of either Direct or Indirect WCF. On the one hand, direct WCF is claimed to have more benefits in certain contexts ([6]Bitchener & Knoch, 2010), while on the other, indirect feedback is shown to be more effective, as coded ([7]Ferris, 2006; [8]Lalande, 1982) or uncoded ([9]Lu, 2010). Furthermore, other studies, however, show no differences between direct and indirect feedback ([10]Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; [4]Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

2.2 Focused Versus Unfocused Corrective Feedback

The WCF literature further distinguishes between focused and unfocused, or comprehensive feedback. Focused feedback corrects only one or a limited number of predetermined error types; whereas, unfocused corrects all types of errors within the learner's text. L2 writing researchers continue to prefer focused feedback over unfocused because excessive feedback can be overwhelming for both teacher (provision of feedback) and the learner (processing of feedback), ([11]Bruton, 2009; [12]Bitchener, 2008; [10] Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, [13]Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). However, the ecological validity of focused feedback in classroom contexts has been brought into question ([14]Bruton, 2010; [15]Storch, 2010; [16]Van Beuningen, 2010). [16]Van Beuningen (2010:19) states that the learning potential of comprehensive WCF should be investigated further, and Ellis et al. [13](2008) believe that the extent to which WCF should be focused to produce efficacy is important, determining that if WCF is beneficial dealing with a number of different errors, it makes sense as a teacher to adopt this approach. In a Japanese university EFL context, dealing with some errors but ignoring others would be confusing and demotivating for learners as the teacher is viewed as an expert by learners.

Furthermore, despite this continued recommendation by scholars for focused feedback, concern has been raised particularly by Ferris [17](2010) over the "strict limits on the number of errors" being studied and the "narrowly defined error categories". The majority of studies have focused on the English article system and English past tense verbs. Both Storch[15] (2010) and Van Beuningen [16](2010), for example, have expressed doubts regarding the generalization of the effectiveness of

corrective feedback when so many studies are based on only a small number of linguistic features. Bitchener[18] (2009) therefore calls on researchers to study a wider variety of feedback.

Results, however, are inconsistent, with some studies showing unfocused feedback facilitating greater accuracy in L2 writing ([19]Van Beuningen et al., 2012), and others claiming focused WCF to be ([20]Sheen et al.2009). Yet more studies show that both types of WCF improve accuracy with no major difference between them ([13]Ellis et al., 2008). According to Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, et al. [21](2010), these inconsistencies are likely because of three confusing uncontrollable variables which influence L2 writing development: learner (L1 background, goals and motivation, L2 proficiency, learning style), situational (the teacher and the physical environment as well as prevailing social, political, or economic conditions shaping the teaching and learning context) and methodological variables (instructional design, what and teaching method).

Despite the lack of consensus as to the best type of feedback, it is clear though that some form of WCF is better than none if not in terms of improved accuracy then student motivation. Lambert[1] (2015), citing various sources from the literature, provides the following list regarding WCF and states that students:

- believe that WCF helps improve their writing, ([22]Ferris, 1995)
- believe WCF is important for grammar errors, ([23]Hedgecock and Lefkowitz, 1996;[24] Radecki and Swales, 1998)
- want corrective feedback on errors but also highly value teacher comments ([24]Radecki and Swales, 1998; [25]Lee, 2008)

2.3 The cognitive perspective on WCF for L2 development

The cognitive perspective on L2 development can best be understood from what Krashen [26](1985) referred to as acquired competence which draws on the automatic and unconsciously accessed implicit knowledge, and learnt competence which taps into the learnt, controlled, rule-guided and accurate explicit knowledge. Although Krashen[27] (2003) asserted that the conversion of learnt knowledge into acquired knowledge does not happen, DeKeyser[28] (1998) stated that explicit knowledge can be converted to implicit knowledge by means of meaningful, contextualised and consistent practice. This conversion is best understood by skill-learning theory which likens language learning to the learning of other skills and is characterized by the progression from declarative knowledge, involving conscious processing and practice, to the final procedural stage where knowledge is accessed unconsciously and automatically. This progression, or proceduralization can be broken down into three stages: the declarative, in which a description of the skill is learnt, the associative, in which a preferred method for executing the skill is practiced, and the autonomous, in which the skill becomes increasingly quicker and automatic. The theory asserts that errors decrease as instruction, practice, and feedback increase (DeKeyser,[29] 2003,[30] 2007), which allows the learner to advance from declarative to procedural knowledge and ultimately, automatization. Feedback, and primarily negative evidence (highlighting what is not

acceptable in the L2) i.e. CF, has been shown to raise levels of grammatical accuracy ([31]Swain, 1995).

An attempt to implement skill-learning theory is Dynamic WCF ([21]Hartshorn et al. (2010) which takes a comprehensive indirect feedback approach with a metalinguistic error code. The code has dual suitability in that Japanese learners, due to their adequate preexisting linguistic knowledge, adapt easily enough especially with a bilingual description sheet. Furthermore, the recording of specific grammatical errors in the form of error tallies, error logs and attempts to consolidate the input of new phrases with a new language log are made manageable. However, studies of Dynamic WCF ([21]Hartshorn et al. 2010) have been centered on daily classes of multilingual, upper intermediate or low advanced ESL learners. The effect on lower ability, monolingual, weekly EFL classes in a Japanese university remains to be seen.

2.4 The sociocultural theory of mind perspective on WCF for L2 development

Sociocultural theory of mind (SCT), although not a theory of L2 learning, is a psychological theory explaining human cognitive development as it occurs in contextualized interactions between an expert and a novice i.e. a teacher and learner, or possibly a more able peer. Differing from other theories, it asserts that cognitive functions are first formed socially as a co-construction with an expert, then become internalized by the individual, transformatively rather than merely imitatively. SCT is interested in the type of assistance offered from the expert to novice (teacher to learner), with feedback constituting a form of assistance advancing the novice from their actual level to their potential one. This difference between these two levels is referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The mediational tool of language plays an especially important role in interactional assistance between teacher and learner, as both the learner's thoughts and decisions about the WCF provided by the teacher become self-directed speech. This provides greater understanding of the linguistic forms in question, potentially being internalized to be used in future new writings. A further advantage of peer feedback is that the WCF becomes vocalized thus enhancing L2 gains even though the L1 is used ([32]Swain, 2006, [33]2010). Furthermore, SCT examines the variables affecting human behavior such as motivation and learning environment as a means of understanding learner response to WCF. Consequently, it is understood that feedback varies in its effectiveness, and therefore needs to take into consideration the learners' existing, and importantly, potential stages of development in order to attune it to their changing needs. Thus, WCF initially maybe direct using reformulations, then progressing to metalinguistic feedback in the form of a correction code, and finally indirect feedback with underlining and circling, and ultimately, other-regulation to self-regulation. While the teacher as expert is accepted by Japanese learners, a more able peer situated correction process may falter due to cultural constraints.

3. The initial writing class model prior to the questionnaire

Prior to embarking on the research for this paper, the researcher/teacher had been engaged in teaching writing classes at the Japanese university in question for one semester. Past experience with teaching writing in a different context had been confined mainly to unfocussed WCF with a

correction code as part of a process-product approach involving single rewrites. Due to teacher familiarity with the approach and suitability for the university context, it was adopted with all classes from first to third grade students and is outlined below.

For two consecutive semesters an error correction code was implemented with the aim of highlighting and thereby reducing learners L2 written errors by negative feedback. A product-process writing approach was used, namely one piece of writing was set following a textbook model and usually started in class and then finished for homework. In the following class this was submitted and then corrected by the teacher. In the same lesson, homework from the previous two lessons which had been corrected was handed back to the students at the beginning of a 90-minute lesson. For approximately the first 20 minutes of the lesson students engaged in rewriting by correcting errors highlighted with the error correction code (see Appendix).

Furthermore, the students were also encouraged to talk to the teacher if necessary to clarify any corrections they were unsure of. This encouragement was strengthened by instrumental motivation with students receiving extra class participation points for speaking out and engaging with the teacher. Other than this oral interaction, direct, unfocussed feedback by written metalinguistic annotations from the correction code was the main form of correction given. However, there were occasions when the teacher corrected with reformulations, which on the first draft would be when it was determined that the correct or more appropriate expression was beyond the current ability of the student. Simply annotating for example, "RW" (rewrite) would be a waste of time for the student as they would more than likely not have had the L2 ability to make the correction.

Oftentimes, a middle solution was sort by providing a hint or clue, for example, the first and last letters and then indicating how many letters were needed to complete the word or phrase. This was often successful, however, during a feedback interaction with the teacher, students signaled that there were occasions when they could not understand or provide the right solution regardless of the clue given. It was because of this frequent occurrence that the teacher often decided to provide direct feedback relying on experience to judge the necessity and appropriacy. Overall, despite not taking an inventory of occurring errors, drawing on long term, professional experience, a general increase in linguistic accuracy was noted by the teacher, however, evidence of repeated errors, regardless of the sustained corrective feedback given over two semesters, was noted.

After one and a half semesters it was decided to investigate how the approach was being received by the students. From an experienced teaching perspective (this researcher's), apart from some slight initial reluctance to completing rewrites, students participated well in the classes and clear improvements could be seen in terms of overall accuracy. As mentioned, no analysis of the actual number or type of errors being made was carried out, therefore a precise account of improved grammatical accuracy cannot be claimed, however, improvements were certainly noticeable at a glance even if only by the reduced amount of corrections given. A questionnaire was administered to students to assess the perceived efficacy, and opinions regarding the WCF with a metalinguistic

code already received (see appendix 1). As a result, four issues could be identified which could be improved upon.

4. Post questionnaire areas to be addressed

The aforementioned questionnaire was distributed towards the end of the second semester for all three grades that were receiving writing instruction from the teacher/researcher.

Four main issues were raised:

- I. Despite students agreeing to their errors being corrected with a correction code, it was noted that at times it had been difficult to interpret and consequently a more direct approach to reviewing it more often in class activities was considered necessary.
- II. There was a preference among some learners for the teacher to provide a reformulation with language which was assumed to be beyond their current ability to produce on their own while relying solely on the correction code. This could serve as valuable L2 input which could be acquired and hopefully recycled over time.
- III. Many students realized that they needed to be more mindful of what they had written in order to improve self-editing ability.
- IV. Many felt their grammar was not improving sufficiently and lacked confidence that common errors would not be repeated.

5. Pedagogical practice to address issues

5.1 Reviewing the correction code and providing model corrections

According to Lambert[1] (2015), motivation certainly has its place in writing classes because students are often resistant to the long term process which demands both perseverance and patience. A corrected paper with correction code annotations, some of which are unclear as to how they should be interpreted, could easily lead to a loss of motivation and increased apathy towards making corrections. Therefore, with the weekly classes, as well as the opportunity for students to have the teacher on hand one-on-one, a review of WCF thinking processes was conducted in class. This involved taking selected errors from student texts before returning them and correcting them in front of the class, eliciting student input where necessary. After two or three examples had been completed the corrected papers were returned to the students to rewrite, calling on the teacher's support if required. As the semester progressed, the feedback was varied to include underlining and circling and slowly reduce the amount of coded annotations, as suggested by a sociocultural theory of mind perspective. As a growing understanding of each individual student's needs and abilities was reached, the teacher could modify and adapt this approach for each student, including more or less as required. There was, however, a marked increase in "miscorrections" (forming the wrong conclusion as to what the error was, or correcting language which was already correct) and there was some indication from individual students that it was perceived as beyond their current capabilities. Knowing when and how to alter feedback approaches is difficult, and obviously

requires a certain amount of trial and error. In future, some actual student errors should be corrected in front of the class from underlined and circled examples in order to build familiarity with the process and to develop awareness of frequent common errors corrected more indirectly. Another possibility would be to have peer correction of such papers if the context allowed. (See below).

Using ideas originating from Dynamic WCF and its modified form based on research by Hartshorn et al. [22] (2010) and Eddington [34](2014) respectively, an error log and new language log was distributed to students.

5.2 Error correction log

After students had received corrected first drafts they were instructed to begin the rewrite process by solo engagement with the correction code, and, if necessary, by requesting the help of the teacher. In certain situations peer feedback was also possible (see below). At the commencement of the semester, each student received a double-sided A4 error correction log which they kept with them and brought to each class. They were instructed to log the grammatical errors such as WT (wrong tense), WF (wrong form), S/P (singular/plural), and A (article), and problems with lexis WW (wrong word) on the X line, then beneath it on the O line, the correction.

No.	Error type	Expression(s)
1	A S/P	X: The rest of student are "news and documentary" type. O: The rest of the students are "news and documentary" types.
2	A wF	X: There is <u>convenient</u> store. O: There is a convenience store.
3	wT	X: I am talking with them every day. O: I talk with them every day

Before submitting any new writing, students were asked to consult their Error logs to review their common errors, and then look at their paper to try and locate anything similar which needed correcting.

5.3 Reformulations and new language log

Prior to the questionnaire being carried out which had prompted new methods to be adopted, reformulations had been given when the teacher felt that the students were unable to provide the correct word, phrase, or sentence by themselves. As a way of consolidating such language and to give learners further opportunities to interact with it by means of recycling, a New Language Log was implemented. The teacher provided reformulations as before, but additionally circled the

language with a blue highlight marker, signaling to the learner that it was for inclusion in their personal New Language Log, an A4 double sided handout like this:

Lesson # / Theme	New Language
Unit 3	This is certainly true in the case of
Unit 3	As far as x is concerned,
Unit 3	<u>(CAUSE)</u> may cause / can lead to / can result in <u>(RESULT)</u>

Some refinement of this idea is needed as most classes were not strictly engaging in writing with its academic functions. The reformulations provided were too specific to the writing in question which severely reduced any possible recycling opportunities. Therefore, in future, more content neutral and generic inclusions (as shown above) should be prioritized. It would provide an opportunity for students to try and include new language in future writing, maybe with instrumental motivation by way of a points system for attempting to try and use it, more points if it is used correctly.

5.4 Peer correction and self-review

Using a socio-cultural theory perspective students interacted together in L1 and compared and discussed their error log sheets together as well as peer review of completed written assignments before submission. Peer review had a mixed response, with some classes initially unable to participate in any meaningful feedback. It would seem that from a cultural perspective it was too demanding to ask them to point out other students' errors. One way to overcome this reticence to identify errors was to emphasize that they were helping their partner by alerting them to mistakes before the paper was submitted. In this way, the more errors that were discovered prior to submission, the less red ink from the teacher's pen would find its way on to their partner's paper. This had a positive effect and participation improved greatly. As a method of self-review, students were encouraged to look over their papers before submission after reviewing their own error logs. Corrections or alterations were often seen to be made

6. Future research

It is proposed to reimplement the techniques outlined above in the following semester (Autumn 2019) making any necessary adjustments or adaptations as deemed necessary as the lessons progress. During this period, linguistic accuracy will be measured (error-free clause ratio) to ascertain whether any definite improvement in written L2 grammatical accuracy can be detected, and therefore, whether a modified version of Dynamic WCF with lower ability learners has any significant efficacy.

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8. Appendix

Writing feedback questionnaire. N = 31.

Results for each question shown below.

1. Which of the following is true?

- A. My English teacher underlines/ circles all my errors.
- B. My English teacher underlines/ circles some of my errors.

If your answer to Question 1 is "B", answer Question 2. If it is "A", go to Question 3.

Results A: 23 B:8

2. Before/ after marking your compositions, does your teacher tell you the types of errors he/she will select to mark? A. Yes. B. No.

Results A: / B:8 of 8

3. Which of the following do you like best?

- A. My English teacher underlines/ circles all of my errors.
- B. My English teacher underlines/ circles some of my errors.
- C. My English teacher does not underline or circle my errors in writing, but gives me some feedback on the content of my writing.

Results A: 28 B:3 C: 0

4. Which of the following is true about your current writing class?

- A. My English teacher corrects all grammar errors for me.
- B. My English teacher corrects some grammar errors for me.

Results A: 16 B:15

5. With regards to grammar errors in writing, which of the following do you like best?

- A. My English teacher corrects all grammar errors for me.
- B. My English teacher corrects some grammar errors for me.
- C. My English teacher does not correct my grammar errors.

Results A: 18 B: 10 C: 3

6. Does your English teacher use correction codes in marking your compositions (i.e., using symbols like WW, WT, etc.)?

- A. Yes. B. No.

Results A: 31 B: 0

If your answer to Question 6 is "Yes", answer Question 7 and 8. If your answer is "No", go to Question 9.

7. What percentage of your English teacher's marking symbols (e.g., WW, WT, etc.) are you able to follow and understand when you are correcting errors in your compositions?

- A. 76-100%. B. 51-75%. C. 26-50%.
- D. 0-25%

Results: A: 18 B: 12 C: 1 D: 0

8. What percentage of errors are you able to correct with the help of your English teacher's marking symbols (e.g., WW, WT, etc.)?

- A. 76-100%. B. 51-75%. C. 26-50%. D. 0-25%

Results A: 18 B: 12 C: 1 D: 0

9. After your teacher has corrected the errors in your compositions, do you think you will make the same errors again? A. Yes. B. No. (Note: 16 respondents skipped this question)

Results: A: 5 B:10

10. Do you want your English teacher to use correction codes (i.e., using symbols like WW, WT, etc.) in marking your compositions? A. Yes. B. No.

Results: A: 30 B: 1

11. Which of the following is true?

- A. In this term, I am making GOOD progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.
- B. In this term, I am making SOME progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.
- C. In this term, I am making LITTLE progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.
- D. In this term, I am making NO progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.

Results A: 4 B: 12 C: 15 D: 0

12. Which of the following do you agree with?

- A. It is mainly the teacher's job to locate and correct errors for students.
- B. It is mainly the students' job to locate and correct their own errors.

(Note: One respondent marked A and B; One respondent did not answer)

Results A: 13 B:16