

School-Based Innovations in Written Corrective Feedback: Opportunities and Challenges

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In different parts of the world, writing teachers are tasked with providing feedback to help students improve their writing. In second language (L2) contexts, one important mission for teachers is to help students improve writing accuracy as part of their writing competence. How to provide written corrective feedback (WCF) is therefore a topic of great significance in L2 contexts. In this paper, I share insights from an ongoing research study on focused WCF in secondary schools in Hong Kong, where writing is learnt more as a foreign than a second language (though English is one of the two official languages, the other being Chinese).

The last two decades have witnessed an exponential growth in research on WCF in L2 contexts, mainly triggered by Truscott's (1996) polemical, landmark article that argues for the abandonment of grammar correction in writing. Truscott's radical stance, however, has not received support from WCF researchers, and instead of focusing on whether WCF should be abandoned or not, research has mainly addressed two issues: (a) the scope of WCF (i.e., whether teachers should respond to written errors comprehensively or in a focused manner), and (b) the WCF strategies (whether to provide correct answers, simply underline, use codes, and/or provide metalinguistic clues) that teachers should use to help students improve written accuracy. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to exploring the scope of WCF, and issues surrounding the implementation of comprehensive versus focused WCF in the classroom.

Conventionally, many L2 teachers respond to written errors comprehensively, trying to catch all errors for students. This approach, however, is considered problematic both from common sense and second language acquisition (SLA) perspectives. Commonsensically, too much attention to written errors takes up a massive amount of teachers' time, burning them out and leaving them with little time for response to other important aspects of student writing. Based on SLA research, comprehensive WCF can overload students cognitively, making it less likely for them to notice, understand and act on the feedback provided

(Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). Given these concerns, a viable alternative is for teachers to adopt a focused approach to WCF, responding to a smaller number of errors/error categories, and helping students improve written accuracy in a gradual manner.

Apparently, the scope of WCF is of significant relevance to many L2 teachers, particularly those working with schoolchildren (who tend to make a lot of errors in writing) and in contexts dominated by an examination culture which attaches great importance to accuracy, such as Hong Kong. For decades, school teachers in Hong Kong have been placing a predominant emphasis on comprehensive WCF (Lee, 2004, 2008). However, teachers themselves have increasingly expressed doubts about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of this type of feedback (Lee, 2011). Research on comprehensive and focused WCF, unfortunately, has failed to produce conclusive findings that can guide teachers' classroom practice (e.g., Bitchener, 2008, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009; Sheen, 2007). Also, existing findings are found to lack pedagogical value since the studies are mostly conducted in experimental/quasi-experimental classrooms with little resemblance to real classrooms. Research that reports on the benefits of focused WCF, for instance, addressed only one or a very small number of error categories (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008), while recent studies showing the effectiveness of comprehensive WCF did not compare it with focused WCF (e.g., Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2008, 2012), with some more recent research comparing direct with indirect comprehensive WCF (e.g., Bonilla López, Van Steendam, & Buyse, 2017; Bonilla López, Van Steendam, Speelman, & Buyse, 2018). The issue of whether focused WCF is a better alternative to comprehensive WCF in authentic classroom contexts remains a conundrum.

To further investigate the efficacy of focused WCF, and to respond to WCF researchers' call for greater ecological validity (Storch, 2018), my ongoing study aims to investigate the efficacy of focused WCF in naturalistic secondary classrooms in Hong Kong, and specifically, to:

- document how teachers implement focused WCF in writing classrooms;
- examine the efficacy of focused WCF in terms of student motivation and written accuracy;
- identify and evaluate the factors that influence the efficacy of focused

WCF; and

- gather insights into the use of focused WCF to maximize student learning in the writing classroom.

Adopting a case study design, the study relies on primarily qualitative methods including interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recalls and document analysis, supplemented by questionnaires and writing tests. Through triangulation of multiple data sources, the findings can shed light on how focused WCF works in real classroom settings and its possible impact on student learning.

In total, six teachers from three secondary schools (two Grade 7 and four Grade 9 classrooms; two teachers from each school) participate in the project voluntarily, with the other teachers teaching the same grade implementing focused WCF in their own classroom without involving data collection. Previously, teachers in the participating schools adopted comprehensive WCF. Such a whole-grade approach to focused WCF is to make sure that students do not think that they are disadvantaged when compared with their counterparts in other classes who are instead receiving comprehensive WCF.

The study started in September 2018 and will finish at the end of the 2018-19 school year. To help teachers implement focused WCF in their writing classroom, I conducted two teacher workshops (six hours in total) in the summer of 2018, which were attended by all the six participating teachers as well as some of their colleagues. The workshops covered the following aspects:

- goals of WCF
- effective WCF: insights from research and practice
- feedback on non-language issues
- implementing focused WCF in the classroom: practical issues for consideration (e.g., number of error types and what error types to target for focused WCF, and use of error codes)
- teachers' hands-on practice with focused WCF
- teachers' collaborative planning for the implementation of focused WCF

At the workshops, it was emphasized that one of the purposes of focused WCF is to free teachers up so that they can spend more time

responding to other important areas of student writing. Another point of emphasis is the need to bring feedback and assessment into closer alignment with teaching and learning so that teachers pre-teach what they focus on in their written feedback before writing, reinforce student learning after writing, and make learning very explicit for students throughout the writing process.

As data collection for the study is still in progress, in what follows I share insights gained from working with the teachers during the project, mainly in terms of opportunities and challenges.

To begin, this project provides new opportunities for the teachers to think outside the box and challenge conventional, ingrained feedback practices that value comprehensive WCF. Through adopting focused WCF, the teachers put less emphasis on errors and more emphasis on content, organization and genre issues, honing their skills as a writing teacher rather than a grammar teacher. The written feedback of teachers, which is more balanced in coverage, is delivered via a feedback form that includes detailed genre/task-specific assessment criteria, while focused WCF is written on student texts. Compared with their previous comprehensive WCF practice, it can be imagined that there is less red ink in student papers, hence more manageable WCF; also, teacher feedback provided in the feedback form can indicate to students the areas that they did well in and those that need more work, facilitating the sharing of diagnostic information. The assessment criteria in the feedback form highlights the areas that teachers value in both teaching and feedback/assessment, helping students understand the goals they should work towards in their writing. In conventional practices, by contrast, students receive papers awash with red ink, comprising comprehensive WCF and perhaps a couple of comments on non-language issues. In general, the teachers also strengthen their pre-writing instruction so as to foster a stronger connection between their own teaching and feedback. In one school where multiple drafting was previously not a common practice, the participating teachers now incorporate multiple drafting so that students are given chances to improve their texts based on teacher feedback (whereas previously students read teachers' comprehensive WCF given to single drafts and did not need to revise their texts for content and organization).

Even though the data collection is not yet completed, a number of

challenges have surfaced. Before the commencement of the project, I was aware that a whole-school approach to focused WCF is preferable, so that students will not compare the type of feedback they receive with the feedback type given to others in the school, and as they proceed to a higher grade, a consistent WCF policy is adopted (see Lee, Mak, & Burns, 2016). However, since comprehensive WCF is such an entrenched practice in Hong Kong schools, getting teachers to agree to participate in a project about focused WCF, with approval and support from their school heads, is not easy. Thus, as a start the project can only be conducted in a single grade level (starting small in a real sense). Another challenge is that despite the teacher workshops, the participating teachers are finding it hard to decide what errors to select for different writing tasks and how many they should address since these require a good understanding of the requirements of the writing tasks, as well as a strong knowledge of students' abilities and needs. At the workshops, the teachers were strongly encouraged to engage in collaborative planning before the start of the project. However, due to the heavy workloads of teachers in Hong Kong schools, such collaborative planning is easier said than done. In reality, some of the participating teachers have to improvise as they go along. Additionally, a formidable challenge observed from the ongoing project is that it may be easy for some teachers to grow skeptical of the efficacy of focused WCF, especially because implementing it entails a number of changes to their previous practice and that the outcome of the innovations is unlikely to be instantaneous. It may be tempting for teachers to slip back to comprehensive WCF when they are faced with challenges since embracing old, familiar practice is bound to be less arduous. In this project, one teacher expressed her frustration over the implementation of focused WCF and gradually reverted back to a comprehensive approach.

Overall, my observation is that teachers with a great commitment to WCF innovation are trying very hard to make things work in their classroom. For instance, one teacher working with low-proficiency students is sparing no effort to establish a supportive learning environment through focused WCF, complemented by a clear linkage between WCF and instruction, explicit explanation of the focused WCF policy, and a strong focus on the meaning of written expression too (whereas in many Hong Kong classrooms teachers tend to respond to errors rather mechanically with much more attention to form than meaning).

There are a few months to go before the end of the project, and hopefully more nuanced understandings of teachers' implementation of focused WCF in real classroom contexts will be yielded, and the multiple data sources will throw light on the efficacy of focused WCF, as well as the influencing factors. The findings of the study will also provide useful implications for teacher education to help frontline teachers develop a very important part of their assessment literacy in the writing classroom.

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