Japanese EFL Learners' Experiences with Written Corrective Feedback

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Abstract

The debate regarding the efficacy of WCF (*Written Corrective Feedback*) spans two decades. Much of the research to date has utilized quantitative methods to investigate students' written output, which all too often neglected learners' experiences and learner diversity. In contrast, this research employs a qualitative approach in an interpretive paradigm to explore the experiences of adult EFL students in Japan on the usefulness of WCF, its effect on their learning and how learner diversity influences the uptake of feedback. This case study investigated experiences with the following feedback modalities: focused direct WCF with content feedback, and focused indirect WCF with content feedback. The innovative exploration and incorporation of student perspectives on these experiences entailed in-depth interviews with the learners. This case study found that participants described the learning generated from WCF as minimal and that WCF did not cause the negative effects that has been posited in some of the literature to date. The need to accommodate learner diversity in the writing classroom and for learners to understand the culture the feedback is embedded in was identified. Practical pedagogical implications to create a classroom environment that promotes better utilization of content feedback and WCF are discussed.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, content feedback, student perception, EFL, adult learners, Japan.

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Introduction

While Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is a longstanding and commonly utilised remediation tool, its implementation and efficacy in terms of improving the grammatical accuracy of students' writing is contested. Notwithstanding the importance of quantitative research in this field, shifts in ontological and epistemological positions have increased awareness about the significant contribution to be made by qualitative research into WCF. This study's post-positivist and exploratory orientation facilitates an understanding of the diverse social, cultural and personal relationships and influences that can affect student learning and the "usefulness" of different feedback techniques in language teaching. Most significantly, this case study incorporates the learners' personal voice in its investigation by including the learners' evaluative and affective reception of WCF.

The current study explores the existing literature and contesting views on the usefulness of WCF; identifies potential shortcomings in previous studies to develop its own research questions; presents its methodological innovation; describes and discusses the findings of the case-study in terms of its research questions; before presenting some conclusions and possible directions for future research into WCF.

Literature Review

The case against WCF
Syntheses of studies on WCF and its role in second language learning that were carried out in the 1990s concluded that WCF does not improve the grammatical accuracy of student writing (Leki, 1990; Truscott, 1996). Furthermore, Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004) argued that WCF should be abandoned because of its potentially "harmful" (1996, p. 328) effects.

Several studies which compared the benefits of WCF and content feedback concluded that content feedback is more useful than WCF in helping learners improve the grammatical accuracy of their writing (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Sheppard 1992). Furthermore, Semke (1984) found WCF to be demotivating for students and Sheppard (1992) found it caused learners to reduce the complexity of their writing.

The above studies have been shown to demonstrate methodological flaws which weaken their contentions (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). In the studies conducted by Kepner (1991) and Sheppard (1992), only one of several written products was examined to measure the learning initiated via WCF. Because gains in grammatical accuracy are not part of a continuous linear process (Nunan, 2001), it could be argued that all of the written products should have been analysed.

The case for WCF
Studies by Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) found that focussed WCF was an effective remediation tool for rule-based linguistic items. However, the content group outperformed WCF groups when word-choice errors only were analysed (Ferris & Roberts, 2001) and there was no significant difference when prepositional errors were examined (Bitchener et al., 2005). The

results of Bitchener et al. and Ferris and Roberts indicate that WCF is potentially effective for addressing certain simple, rule-based linguistic items.

Numerous studies have continued the investigation into the effectiveness of different types of focused WCF when treating rule-based language items. Whilst results are not completely congruent on exactly what type of focused WCF is most effective, the results are congruent in revealing that focused WCF improved the accuracy of use when compared with control groups (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009).

The aforementioned studies are, however, also not flawless in terms of their design. Ferris and Roberts (2001) measured learning using revised texts rather than new writing tasks, which does not provide evidence of any actual learning having taken place (Truscott 1999).

Additionally, many studies supporting the use of WCF in language learning used pre-/post-testing to demonstrate and measure learning initiated through WCF (for example, Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009b). We contend that improvement displayed in post-tests may or may not be due to the provision of WCF – there has been no qualitative research to investigate the possible effects of other variables. Finally, much of this research was conducted with participants from various backgrounds. However, the possible influence of participants' educational and cultural background on the efficacy of WCF (in terms of facilitating their learning) received little or no attention, despite there being evidence of its significance (Schulz, 2001).

Despite the extensive research on WCF, the voice of the student has been given very little attention. Studies have found that adult learners perceive WCF as a learning tool, that students prefer to have all errors corrected and that they believe WCF to be necessary to improve their writing (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2005; Diab, 2005). This case study was designed to address this gap and investigate the usefulness of direct and indirect WCF combined with content feedback from the perspective of the learner in the context of EFL instruction in Japan. Based on these aims, the following research questions were formulated:

> 1. How useful do learners find direct WCF and indirect WCF in improving the grammatical accuracy of their writing?
> 2. Do content feedback and/or WCF affect learners negatively?

Methodology

A case-study approach was implemented in order to provide an in-depth description of participants' experiences with WCF.

The sample for this case study comprised of three Japanese adult English learners. Participants' educational and cultural backgrounds were analogous: Japanese nationals who completed all elementary, junior- and high school, and tertiary education in Japan. After completing tertiary education, all participants spent a minimum of six months studying English in a native English-speaking country, primarily to increase their scores in either the TOEIC or IELTS English proficiency

tests. Results of these tests can be summarised as follows (pseudonyms have been used):

Akiko	TOEIC 735 (Listening 395, Reading 340)
Yoko	IELTS Band 6 (Reading 7, Writing 5.5, Speaking 6, Listening 6.5)
Takeko	TOEIC 855 (Listening 495, Reading, 360)

Table 1: Participant level

Instruments and Sequence

Two instruments were used for data collection: participants' writing tasks and one-to-one interviews. Participants produced three writing tasks – with two drafts for each task – within an eight-week period. After receiving feedback for the first draft, participants considered the feedback and made changes to their written work as they saw fit.

The sequence of the study was as follows:

Written Task 1 – content feedback only
Written Task 2 – content feedback and direct WCF (with a written meta-linguistic explanation)
Written Task 3 – content feedback and indirect WCF

After completion of all three writing tasks, participants' writing was analysed for trends. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted.

Due to the evidence that WCF is most useful when it is focussed (Han, 2002; Sheen et al., 2009) and when used with rule-based linguistic items (Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), it was decided to employ focussed WCF and to include rule-based items but ignore non-rule based items.

Findings and Discussion

The following section presents the findings in alignment with the research questions: each feedback type is analysed separately where possible. Following the presentation of the findings pertaining to each research question is a discussion which describes possible reasons for the outcomes, theoretical implications and any issues raised by the three participants.

Research Question 1: How useful do learners find direct WCF and indirect WCF in improving the grammatical accuracy of their writing?

Perceived usefulness of direct WCF

All participants described direct WCF as easy to understand and helpful. Direct WCF requires very little autonomy and accordingly was implemented successfully by all participants. Despite the increased volume of feedback when compared with the first writing task, no participant experienced negative feelings. On the contrary, Akiko

actually said she was "happy" with the extra volume. All participants appreciated the meta-linguistic explanations that accompanied the direct WCF as it enabled them to understand their errors.

Despite the unanimous perception that the direct WCF was helpful, all participants expressed a lack of confidence when asked if they now better understood how to use the corrected linguistic items than before receiving the WCF. This perception of uncertainty was borne out when the same linguistic items were used with little or no improvement in the subsequent writing task and was also evident in the participants' inability to self-correct the same errors when provided with indirect feedback. Participants were also unable to provide any explicit knowledge on how to use the corrected linguistic items when they were asked to provide examples of how the WCF was helpful. This in itself does not indicate that nothing was learnt – language learners' accuracy when using a specific linguistic item can be variable even when the situation is the same (Nunan, 2001). However, from the students' perspective, learning was described as minimal.

This notwithstanding, both Yoko and Takeko articulated that the main insight they derived from the direct WCF was not so much how to use the items, but, rather, an increased awareness of the linguistic items they needed to focus on in order to improve the grammatical accuracy of their writing. This corroborates Hyland's (2011) finding that students find that WCF has consciousness-raising value. Thus, in this case study, direct WCF was not perceived as a tool which directly improves grammatical accuracy, but, instead, as a means of identifying those areas in the learners' interlanguage that require attention and remediation.

Two of the three participants stated that direct WCF was their preferred method of feedback for addressing grammatical errors. This result supports the observations of Amrhein and Nassaji (2005), who found direct WCF to be the preferred method of feedback and proposed that this stemmed from the perception that it is the teacher's responsibility to correct errors. However, this case study indicated there were different reasons for the positive perception of direct WCF. For Akiko, the direct WCF seemed to alleviate the *angst* she experienced due to a lack of confidence in her own grammatical abilities. Takeko believed that she experienced direct WCF as the most helpful form of feedback because of the particular learning stage she was at. She suggested that indirect WCF might possibly be more useful at a later stage of learning.

All participants described the learning that occurred as a result of the direct WCF as minimal. This aligns with findings from Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986); Semke (1984); Sheppard (1992) and Truscott (1996). There are two factors that may have contributed to this perception. Firstly, due to the time constraints of this study, participants received direct WCF only once. Their perception of the efficacy of this feedback modality may have varied had the participants received direct WCF multiple times over an extended period. However, prolonged use of direct WCF in other EFL/FL contexts (Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984) was not shown to facilitate significant improvement, so it is equally possible that this perception would not have changed. Further investigation is nonetheless required before any conclusions can be made for the Japanese context. It should be noted that Bitchener and Knoch (2009a) and Sheen (2007) claimed that WCF demonstrated a significant effect when provided once only – a claim that was not substantiated in this study.

A second possible reason for participants describing their learning from direct WCF as minimal is the lack of natural input they received. This case study found that participants viewed direct WCF as a tool that raised awareness rather than a learning tool. Whilst results from this small study cannot be extrapolated, this finding suggests an interesting proposition: namely, that this raised-consciousness value may have been significant factor in previous studies in ESL contexts that found direct WCF to be an effective learning tool. These students' greater opportunity to observe targeted linguistic items being used correctly in the abundant natural input available in an ESL context may have facilitated their improved grammatical accuracy with regard to these items in post-test scores. This contention aligns with Schmidt's (1990) notion of noticing, Harmer's (2007) observation that certain language items become salient after they become "noticeable", and Krashen's (1976) hypothesis that both "informal environments and formal instruction" (p. 167) contribute differently to language ability in adults and that informal environments can provide the required input to operationalise the language acquisition device. Furthermore, congruent with McLaughlin's theory (as cited by Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) that learnt knowledge can become acquired, it is possible that the contribution made by the informal natural input is implicated in the process of a learners' explicit knowledge becoming automated knowledge. This theory could also explain why studies in ESL contexts have more often than not found WCF useful, while many (but not all) studies in EFL/FL contexts have found WCF to be ineffective.

An investigation of this contention is warranted in the EFL context of Japan. Because of Japan's monolingual culture (Gottlieb, 2008), there is little (if any) English input or output beyond the classroom, which is a stark contrast to most ESL contexts. Accordingly, such a semi-controlled environment would facilitate testing of how much learning occurs due to WCF whilst considering input and output. If there is indeed a strong causal relationship between WCF and learning, as often suggested in the literature (see Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Sheen, 2007; Sheen et al., 2009), then learning should still be evident despite lower levels of input and output. This would also facilitate the development of a research paradigm that investigates whether and how WCF, in combination with other factors, may be useful in helping L2 learners improve their grammatical accuracy.

Perceived usefulness of indirect WCF

Whilst all participants found it difficult to implement the indirect feedback, their perception of its usefulness and success in implementing it varied. In most instances, Yoko succeeded in finding the error and making the appropriate edit. For Yoko, the indirect feedback provided the opportunity to attend to the grammatical accuracy of a text she had already written. In the interview she articulated that the cognitive load of caring about grammar while actually writing the essay was too burdensome for her, explaining: "When I concentrate on writing essay I cannot care everything, like grammar". Yoko stated that indirect WCF was the most useful type of feedback for her because she enjoyed searching for her own errors and the previously received direct WCF equipped her to perform this task. Semke (1984) found participants expressed a negative attitude toward indirect WCF because they did not feel equipped to utilise it. This study suggests that such negative feelings might be avoided by providing students with direct WCF prior to providing them with indirect WCF.

Takeko did not find the indirect WCF useful. She commented: "[It was] sort of hard to find the errors" and "I'm still not sure what is wrong and where". Takeko said that this did not generate any negative feelings but that she was keen to know exactly where her errors were. Overall, Takeko was able to successfully detect and correct her own errors with approximately 50 per cent accuracy.

Akiko's response to how she felt about indirect WCF implied some negativity when she said that "it was really difficult" and described her feelings as "troublesome". This was reflected in her inability to successfully detect and correct errors in her second draft, in which her unsuccessful attempts significantly outweighed her successful corrections. However, Akiko acknowledged indirect WCF could potentially benefit learning.

Previous studies that have compared direct and indirect types of feedback have been incongruent in their findings. While Lalande (1982) found indirect WCF to be more useful than direct WCF in improving grammatical accuracy, Robb et al. (1986) and Ferris and Roberts (2001) detected no significant difference. On the other hand, van Beuningen, Jong and Kuiken (2012) and Bitchener and Knoch (2010) found no significant difference in the short term, but stated that direct WCF was more effective in the long term. However, the effect of providing a sequence of direct and then indirect WCF has not yet been investigated. Yoko's comments imply that the usefulness of indirect WCF could be influenced by prior provision of direct WCF, consequently highlighting the need for further investigation of this possibility. Takeko also touched on this issue by stating indirect WCF was not helpful because she was not yet at a level that could utilise it. After a sustained period of direct WCF, Takeko may have been better equipped to utilise indirect WCF, which, in turn, may have significantly changed her perception of its usefulness. Another issue raised by these comments is how the term *useful* is conceptualised. If its conceptualisation shifts from the visible criterion of improved grammatical accuracy in written products towards encompassing the possible effects of indirect WCF on the nonlinear learning process (Nunan, 2001), the perceived usefulness of indirect WCF may take on new dimensions.

A potential factor in Akiko's negative view of indirect WCF was that it did not tell her which type of errors to look for, something she seemed unable to intuit. Yoko and Takeko's self-corrections and interviews indicated that they intuitively understood that the direct WCF pointed out their common errors and that these were the types of errors to look for when utilising indirect WCF. Akiko did not make this connection, and she tried to correct linguistic items that the direct WCF from the previous writing task did not highlight. This emphasises the need to explicate which type of errors learners should be focussed on when utilising indirect WCF.

Takeko and Yoko stated they would have preferred the inclusion of an extra step in the drafting process (before final submission) when utilising indirect WCF. In this study, participants received indirect feedback on the first draft and then resubmitted their final draft of the writing task. The feedback provided for the final draft did not indicate which errors were accurately self-corrected, but as per methodological and ethical considerations, focused on general feedback about the writing task as a whole. Both Yoko and Takeko believed it would be beneficial if an additional draft were to

be utilised before final submission, with this additional draft containing direct WCF which would identify how successfully the indirect WCF had been utilised.

This recommendation identifies a further aspect of WCF that requires investigation: namely, whether a drafting process of indirect WCF followed by direct WCF would increase the usefulness of the WCF for the student. The absence of this "additional" draft appears to be a factor in Takeko's perception of indirect WCF as not useful. At this point, though, the issues of practicality raised by Truscott (1996) are salient. This would significantly increase the time and effort required by the teacher to guide a large group of students through the whole process in a way allowing them to move on to a new writing task in an appropriate time frame. A possible compromise could be the additional step being performed by peers rather than the teacher.

Research Question 2: Does content feedback and/or WCF affect learners negatively?

Negative effects of content feedback

Whilst all participants responded positively to questions pertaining to the usefulness of content feedback, close observation of one of the participant's writing revealed a negative effect. In Akiko's first writing task, content feedback was used to clarify the writer's intention with the use of a non-restrictive relative clause. In the interview, Akiko was able to clearly state that she had been trying to use a relative clause but said she simplified the sentence due to not knowing how to make the clarification requested by the content feedback. This resulted in the sentence being changed from a complex sentence to a simple sentence.

Excerpt from Akiko's Essay 1, Draft 1:

There is Tsukiji where is the largest outer fish market in Tokyo.
>   *Content feedback:*
>   "where is the………?" Are you asking a question?

Excerpt from Akiko's Essay 1, Draft 2:

>   Tsukiji is the largest outer fish market in Tokyo.

Whilst the correction the participant made was correct, it reduced the degree of complexity, which is congruent with the negative effects of WCF found by Sheppard (1992). Furthermore, Akiko did not attempt to use a relative clause in all subsequent writing tasks. Thus, this case study found that content feedback, not WCF, may cause a language learner to avoid using a linguistic item in subsequent writing tasks.

Despite acknowledging that minor errors were not a major problem if communicating with an L2 Japanese speaker in Japanese, Akiko said she valued grammatical accuracy over communicative effect. Her reasoning for this was: "I care because it is concerned with myself". Therefore, in Akiko's case, it could be argued that the real cause of the negative effects was not the content feedback, but, rather, her unrealistic ambition of writing grammatically perfect sentences. This supports Diab's (2005) contention that students may have "unrealistic beliefs about writing" (p. 40) and

findings that some students have the misconceived notion that the goal of their writing is error-free writing (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2005).

Akiko's case corroborates Saito's (1994) argument that teachers need to shift student perceptions about what is beneficial. This could entail teachers highlighting what their expectations are and what the students' expectations should be, and by explaining their rationale for using a particular type of feedback and how it will improve the students' writing.

Negative effects of WCF

The results from both the interviews and written tasks clearly indicate that WCF did not have a negative impact on participants. All participants clearly stated that, after receiving direct WCF for the second writing task, they did not avoid or feel more hesitant about using the corrected linguistic items in the subsequent writing task. This response was supported by the analysis of participants' writing tasks. Linguistic items that received direct WCF were not avoided in subsequent writing tasks by any of the participants. It should be noted, however, that the corrections focused on articles, verbs, and noun endings, which are essentially very difficult to avoid.

Another potential negative impact of WCF identified by Semke (1984) is a reduction in fluency, or the time it takes to produce a writing task. Participants were asked if they spent more time on subsequent writing tasks due to concern over the accuracy of corrected linguistic items. Again, all participants clearly indicated that receiving WCF did not cause them to spend more time on their writing, nor did they say they were more anxious or hesitant when attempting to use these linguistic items again. Responses to this question included:

> Takeko: Nah. I'm always making mistakes. [*laughing*]
> Yoko: Just write [not worrying]. [*laughing*]

Akiko indicated that she did worry about grammar and did spend a lot of time worrying whether a linguistic item was correct or not. However, Akiko made it clear that this was not related to the WCF, but that this occurred with all writing tasks, including the stage in the study where no WCF had been provided for the writing tasks. This suggests Akiko's anxiety was not associated with the WCF but, instead, stems from her belief that she has low grammatical accuracy, as revealed in her interview when she said: "I'm not good at [grammar]".

Misunderstandings: a potential problem with both content and WCF

There were instances where the teacher misunderstood the participant's intended meaning and consequently requested corrections that misrepresented their opinion. Takeko made this clear by stating: "First draft, always I wrote, like, making some sentence but when I get the feedback sometimes you get the wrong way, … like not what I want to say, but like just don't know how to say". Takeko highlighted the following example:

Excerpt from Takeko, Essay 3, Draft 1:

> Blue sky in the summer is very shinney and not too hot compare to Japanese summer.
> *The feedback given for this was:*
> What do you mean by "shiny" sky?

The feedback was assuming that the participant was attempting to say that the sky is clear, free of pollution and so forth. However, during the interview Takeko stated that she was trying to say "shiny sky" meant that there was a lot of sunlight, which resulted in plants and trees assuming a beautiful green colour that shone against the blue sky. This confusion affirms the claim that there is sometimes a mismatch between what the student was thinking and what the teacher thinks the student is trying to say (Ferris, 1995; Zamel, 1985).

A similar phenomenon occurred with Yoko. In the third essay, indirect feedback was provided for the following sentence:

> Third, I like happy ending.

Indirect feedback was given on the premise that the noun ending would be changed to its plural form, stating a general preference for movie endings. However, Yoko changed the sentence to the following:

> Third, I like the ending of the movie.

The change Yoko made expresses a liking for the ending of a particular movie, not a general preference. Two issues arise from this unexpected edit. First, Yoko produced language the teacher did not think she was capable of. This gives credence to Truscott's (1996) argument that interlanguage is complex and it is extremely difficult for a teacher to estimate which linguistic items a student is ready to acquire. The second issue is that if direct feedback had been provided for this writing task, the student would have most likely felt obliged to make a change that not only misrepresented what they wanted to say but would also have restricted their language use.

Consequently, this study found that the use of direct WCF and/or content feedback can not only potentially cause a learner to misrepresent their opinion, but may also in some circumstances restrict the language use of a learner. (This was not an issue with indirect WCF due to its autonomous nature.) The findings highlight instances where the researcher had misunderstood the participants' intention and thus provided

feedback that was unhelpful. This reinforces the usefulness of one-to-one interviews between the teacher and student to facilitate clarification of both the student's intention with certain phrases and the student's understanding of the teacher's feedback. Zamel (1985) argues for the importance of the teacher moving away from an authoritative role that takes control of the text and towards a collaborative relationship with students to confirm what the writer is trying to say and offer suggestions through discussions with the learner.

Conclusions

This case study investigated the experiences of Japanese EFL learners with WCF from the perspective of the learner. It draws our attention to, and at times challenges, a number of issues and findings in the current literature on feedback in L2 writing. It also highlights possible implications for the L2 classroom and a number of issues that warrant further investigation. It is not intended that the conclusions drawn in this study be postulated and extrapolated back into the adult EFL context of Japan, but, rather, that they be explored in future studies with larger samples facilitating more decisive implications and conclusions.
This case study found:

Learning derived through the use of direct WCF in the short term was described as minimal. Participants described direct WCF as a device that increased awareness of common errors rather than a learning tool per se.

Direct WCF did not cause any anxiety or avoidance in subsequent writing tasks for participants in this study.

The potential negative effects of WCF can also be generated by content feedback. This study suggests that such negative effects are not necessarily related to feedback (or type of feedback), but, rather, originate from a learner being overly conscientious about grammar.

Learner misconceptions need to be addressed by teachers to support learners who are overly anxious about grammatical accuracy.

The preferred type of feedback to address grammatical issues varies according to the learner. This highlights the need for teachers to explain the rationale of the feedback used and expectations of how it will be utilised to ensure there are minimal gaps between the teacher's and learners' expectations.

There were cases when the teacher misinterpreted the writer's actual intentions and provided direct WCF or content feedback that either limited the student's language use or misrepresented their ideas. In order to prevent this, teachers and learners need to work co-operatively to minimise misunderstandings.

There were instances where learners simplified their writing due to feeling unable to express themselves. Consequently, learners need to note these instances and discuss them with the teacher.

By providing direct WCF before providing indirect WCF and specifically stating

which errors should be addressed, potential negative effects of indirect WCF, as discussed by Semke (1984), may be avoided.

When indirect WCF is implemented, learners believed they would benefit from direct feedback concerning the errors they successfully/unsuccessfully found and corrected, thus adding an extra step in the drafting process.

By investigating learners' experiences, this study argues a reconceptualization of how WCF's usefulness is identified. Rather than a simple causal link between feedback and language gains, it argues for a re-examination of the role WCF plays (or doesn't play) within the learning process itself.

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