A Quasi-Experimental Study Investigating the Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on Students' Writing Accuracy

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Abstract

It has been widely recognized that writing is one of the most critical micro-skills in language teaching and learning. Consequently, numerous researchers in English Language Teaching (ELT) have investigated the impact of written corrective feedback (WCF) on students' writing proficiency. The research on this topic has produced mixed and inconclusive results, indicating a lack of consensus on the efficacy of WCF. This study examines WCF's impact on the writing accuracy of S4 students at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes. To achieve this objective, a quasi-experimental case study design was employed. Research instruments included pre-tests and post-tests administered to control and experimental groups to measure students' writing achievements with and without WCF. Additionally, a questionnaire was distributed to 64 students and 30 teachers to explore their preferences for WCF techniques. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with teachers to identify challenges that prevent them from providing direct WCF. The results indicated that the control group showed lower achievement scores than the experimental group, suggesting a disadvantage in learning writing without WCF. The questionnaire results revealed a mismatch between teachers' and students' preferences for WCF techniques; students preferred direct WCF, while teachers favoured indirect WCF. Insights from the interviews indicated that most teachers are reluctant to provide direct WCF due to large class sizes. In conclusion, this paper offers several pedagogical implications for stakeholders, teachers, and students at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes to improve writing skills' teaching and learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been widely recognized that writing is one of the most important micro-skills in language teaching and learning. In fact, it is the most challenging skill for instructors to teach and for students to learn compared to speaking, reading, or listening (Hartshorn et al., 2010; Hayes & Flower, 1986; Sharples et al., 1989; May, 2022). Yet, as a productive or active skill, writing allows teachers to reflect upon the effectiveness of their teaching methodologies based on the learning outcomes. It also helps the learners evaluate their progression in language learning based on the corrective feedback provided by their teachers. However, teachers and learners neglect the assessment of this skill despite its importance in foreign or second language acquisition.

All these factors, among so many others, make teaching the skill of writing a vital area of research. A central question often raised is how to teach it effectively. This question has been investigated for decades, and many approaches to teaching writing have been adopted and adapted throughout the history of language teaching, especially apropos of writing assessment strategies that teachers use for error correction. Formative WCF, which is an important example of classroom assessment, was found to play a vital role in promoting learning. Recent research has emphasized its importance in language teaching and learning. Katz (2012, p. 73) argues for the use of formative assessment, saying, "Feedback that provides specific and descriptive information to students has been identified as a crucial element in effective formative assessment." Along the same lines, Wiliam (1996, p.197) advances that "little effective instruction can take place without feedback."

Given the significant impact of corrective feedback on students' performance and the improvement of their general linguistic proficiency, using WCF to assess writing skills has become one of the most researched and discussed issues in language education. However, the efficacy of this writing assessment technique is restricted because teachers rarely exercise it in responding to students' erroneous written productions. They consider it a time-consuming classroom practice that is "fraught with uncertainty about its long-term effectiveness" (Ferris, 1999, p. 1). Yet, to be able to provide guidance and assistance to students, teachers need to respond to errors effectively. Following Johnson (1995), cited in Penny (2003, p.110), "For a successful acquisition of a skill, the learner needs feedback on how well he or she is doing, hence the importance of the provision of constant and honest assessment."

Considering that the provision of WCF strengthens students' writing skills, as an EFL teacher, the researcher has noticed that most teachers complain about students' weaknesses in writing. However, only a few provide WCF during writing lessons to respond to students' written output. Moreover, many teachers' repertoire of error treatment strategies is limited to either ignoring the error or merely underlying it without providing information about its nature or the correct form, which does not allow students to recognize and correct their mistakes.

In response to this problem, the present study investigates the effect of direct WCF on students' writing accuracy. Additionally, it aims to identify the preferences of EFL teachers and students for error correction techniques in writing and to uncover the challenges teachers face in providing WCF. The study also examines how the absence of WCF may hinder students' writing accuracy or exacerbate their weaknesses. Consequently, this research will contribute valuable insights to the TEFL field by enriching the ongoing academic debate on the effectiveness of WCF in improving students' writing accuracy. Furthermore, it will offer practical implications and recommendations for educational stakeholders, including teachers and learners. Overall, this study provides information that can be used to refine and enhance strategies for assessing writing.

It was hypothesized that there would be significant differences in the accuracy of students' writing, with or without the provision of WCF. Against this background, the present paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: will the students' writing accuracy improve following the provision of direct WCF?
RQ2: What written corrective feedback strategies do EFL students and teachers prefer?

In agreement with the research questions, this study revolves around the following hypotheses:

H1: The provision of direct WCF improves students' writing accuracy.
H2: There is a mismatch between teachers' and learners' preferences for WCF strategies.

This paper consists of four parts. The first one clears the ground by defining the key terms in this study: corrective feedback and writing accuracy. The second one reviews the literature related to WCF, provides some of its types, and highlights the findings of previous studies. As for the third part, it sketches out the methodological procedures opted for to carry out this research. The fourth and last part presents the findings, discusses them in light of previous research, and draws conclusions and implications.

1.1. Clearing The Ground
1.1.1. Corrective feedback defined

Before delving into arguing the extent to which WCF affects students' writing accuracy, we need first to clarify the meaning of the term 'corrective feedback':

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching defines feedback in teaching as "comments or other information that learners receive concerning their success on learning tasks or tests, either from the teacher or other persons" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 217).On the other hand, Lightbown and Spada (1990) refer to corrective feedback as "any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect." (p.171). For Lyster and Panova (2002, p.574), feedback can be defined as "any reaction of the teacher which transforms, disapprovingly refers to, or demands improvement of the learner utterance."

Finally, according to Sheen (2007, p.23), feedback can be understood as teachers' effort to encourage the students to focus on the accuracy of their language productions. Given these definitions, the researcher will take corrective feedback as giving direct and indirect written information about students' ungrammatical or erroneous writings.

1.1.2. Writing accuracy defined

Literature on ELT reveals that accuracy is usually juxtaposed with fluency. While the latter is often associated with the oral production of language, the former is related to the grammatical correctness of language. One of the well-known definitions of 'accuracy' in the literature of language teaching and learning is the one provided by Skehan & Foster (1997), who define this concept as "the extent to which the language produced conforms to the target language norms" (p.232). However, this definition seems too generic as it fails to provide sufficient attention to the nature of accuracy. Alternatively, The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching defines accuracy as "the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 223). This definition entails that the accuracy of language involves the aspect of grammaticality. Therefore, in the present study, the author defines writing accuracy as the ability of students to produce error-free writing.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
2.1. Types of written corrective feedback

In the reviewed studies, a distinction is often made between different types of WCF. This distinction is based on two criteria: the focus of the feedback and the way it is provided. The following table summarizes the strategies for WCF and the studies which covered them:

Table 1:Strategies for the provision of written corrective feedback

Type of WCF	Definition	Example studies
Direct WCF	The correct form should be provided on students' papers, including such treatment as crossing out an unnecessary element, inserting a missing component, and writing the correct form above or near the error.	Ellis (2009) Ferris (2006) Ferris & Robert (2001) Sheen (2007)
Indirect WCF	Pointing out the error without correcting it. This can be done by underlining or circling errors, inserting a	Lee (1997) Lalande (1982)

	sign to indicate a missing word, or placing a question mark alongside a confusing phrase.	
Focused WCF	The teacher chooses to treat students' errors selectively. He targets only one or a limited range of error types.	Lee (2004) Sheen (2007)
Unfocused WCF	This approach involves correcting all errors in the student's text.	Frear & Chiu (2015)
Metalinguistic WCF	It refers to using abbreviated labels or codes for different kinds of errors. These codes can be put over the location of errors in the text or the margin.	Bitchner (2008) Bitchner & Knoch (2010) Shintani (2016)
Alternative WCF	This approach involves WCF given by self or by peers.	Diab (2016) Gaskell & Cobb (2004)
Dynamic WCF	It is an approach to correcting errors based on students' individual needs.	Evans et al. (2011) Hartshorn et al. (2010)

2.2. Previous studies

A growing body of literature has examined the effectiveness of WCF provision in boosting EFL students' writing abilities. Previous studies produced opposing and inconclusive results on the role of WCF in teaching the skill of writing, which suggests that there is not yet a consensus among researchers on its efficacy. This is mainly attributed to the variations in the treatment methods and research designs used to approach this issue (Meng, 2016; Ahmadi et al., 2012). As an effect, drawing sound conclusions from existing research on WCF in teaching writing is a complicated task.

On the one hand, it has been proved that developing students' writing skills successfully calls for offering them written corrective feedback, which helps them to amend their erroneous written productions. SLA literature reveals that WCF enhances learners' writing grammatical accuracy over time (Sheen et al., 2009; Diab, 2016; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris, 1999). Research also proved that the provision of WCF encourages students to revise their written works (Ahmadi et al., 2012; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In contrast, the ignorance of students' writing errors reinforces their weaknesses in writing (Ebadi, 2014; Sheen, 2007).

On the other hand, Truscott (1996) states that grammar correction in L2 writing is ineffective; he even considers corrective feedback harmful and should be abandoned. This scholar argues that providing error correction negatively affects students' attitudes towards writing, whereas students not provided with any correction are more thrilled to write. Truscott's position on the ineffectiveness of error correction seems consistent with the natural method of language teaching developed by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terell in the 1970s. Other scholars widely endorsed this claim. Polio et al. (1998) found that the students provided with WCF did not outperform the ones who received no error correction. Similarly, Fazio (2001) conducted a study on the effect of WCF on students' spelling accuracy; he found no significant relationship between the provision of WCF and the accuracy of spelling. Along the same lines, Loewen and Erlam (2006) examined the effect of WCF on university students' composition skills. His study concluded that WCF did not significantly improve students' writing abilities. Therefore, it is evident that previous studies yielded conflicting findings on the effectiveness of WCF in teaching writing skills.

3. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

3.1.Research approach

In the present study, the research problem was investigated through a mixed methods approach as a strategy of inquiry. This approach was adopted because the study aimed to collect, analyze, and interpret quantitative and qualitative data to understand better its research problem, which may not have been obtained through collecting and analyzing only one type of data.

Therefore, two types of data were collected. The quantitative data included the scores obtained from the pre-tests and the post-tests and two structured questionnaires that addressed students' and teachers' preferences for written corrective feedback techniques. Afterwards, qualitative data was collected by interviewing teachers about the challenges inhibiting the provision of direct WCF.

3.2. Research design

This study opted for a quasi-experimental case study design. In this kind of research design, according to Creswell (2014), "the experimental group (A) and the control group (B) are selected without random assignment. Both groups take a pre-test and post-test, [but] only the experimental group receives the treatment" (p.172). Therefore, the control group in this study received traditional writing instruction lacking the provision of direct WCF. In contrast, the experimental group was taught writing using a direct WCF-based approach as a method of instruction. The period of instruction for the two groups has lasted for two months. When this period was over, the two groups were tested in writing an argumentative essay to measure their improvement.

3.3. Participants and setting

The participants of this study are 64 S4 English Department students at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes, Morocco. They belong to the Advanced Composition and Introduction to Research classes, representing the treatment group (N=33) and the control group (N=31). The number of students in each class is more than 100. Still, only those who attended all sessions were selected to mitigate the effect of the absence of subjects on the study results, especially in the experimental group, which is meant to reveal the outcomes from the intervention of the researcher. In addition to students, 30 teachers with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 17 years took part in this study.

3.4. Research variables

Like any other quasi-experimental study, the present study aims to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables. As far as the independent one is concerned, it is the controlled provision of WCF to the subjects. On the other hand, the dependent variable is concerned with the accuracy of students' writing. This latter is considered dependent because it is hypothesized to be affected positively by the provision of WCF.

3.5.Research Instruments

Pre-test: The control and experimental groups sat for this test before providing writing instruction. Both groups were asked to write an argumentative essay on why English should become a language of instruction. The objective was to gauge students' actual writing abilities. The time allotted to the test was one hour and a half, which is an adequate amount of time, and it used a 20-point grading scale.

Post-test: it took place after two months of teaching advanced composition with the provision of written corrective feedback to the treatment group and through traditional instruction to the control group. The objective was to gauge the potential improvement of students' writing accuracy. This test was the same as the pre-test in content, allotted time, and grading scale.

Questionnaire: it is a structured questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice statements to elicit students' and teachers' preferred WCF strategies. These strategies of corrective feedback provision are presented along with their definitions to help the participants understand what they stand for.

Semi-structured interviews: the researcher interviewed five teachers from those who filled out the questionnaire to investigate the challenges inhibiting them from providing direct WCF.

4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS
4.1. Results of the Pre-Test and Post-Test

The first question of the current study investigates whether the provision of WCF impacts students' writing accuracy. This question reads as follows:

RQ1: will the students' writing accuracy improve following the provision of direct WCF?

This study hypothesized that the provision of WCF positively affects the accuracy of students' writing. The null hypothesis assumes no relationship exists between WCF provision and students' writing performance. To test this hypothesis, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean grades of the participants according to whether they were taught advanced composition with WCF provision or through traditional instruction. The aim was to see which method brings about better results. The table below displays descriptive statistics for the two groups, including the means and the standard deviations:

Table 2:   Means of groups in the pre-tests and post-tests

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	Control Group	31	6,12	2,65	,47687
	Treatment Group	33	6,93	2,01	,35070
Post-test	Control Group	31	6,74	2,26	,40684
	Treatment Group	33	12,15	2,10	,36701

As can be seen in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the means of the two groups. The pre-test score of the treatment group is (M=6.93, SD=2.01), and their post-test score is (M=12.15, SD=2.10), meaning that the students' writing accuracy has significantly improved following the provision of direct WCF. On the other hand, the pre-test score of the control group is (M=6.12, SD=2.65) and their post-test score is (M=6.74, SD=2.26), indicating that almost no improvement has been made to the students' writing accuracy after being taught advanced composition through traditional instruction, that is without WCF provision. Following these results, it is clear that the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between WCF provision and writing achievement is rejected.

4.2. Results of questionnaires

The second research question of the current study intends to explore students' and teachers' preferences for WCF strategies to identify if there is a mismatch between them. The question reads as follows:

RQ2: What written corrective feedback strategies do EFL students and teachers prefer?

A questionnaire with multiple-choice statements was administered to participants to investigate their preferences for WCF strategies. This questionnaire aimed to identify their most preferred types of WCF. Each option included a definition of the respective WCF strategy to ensure participants understood them clearly. The list comprised five types of WCF: direct WCF, indirect WCF, metalinguistic WCF, alternative WCF, and dynamic WCF. The results are presented in Figure 1.
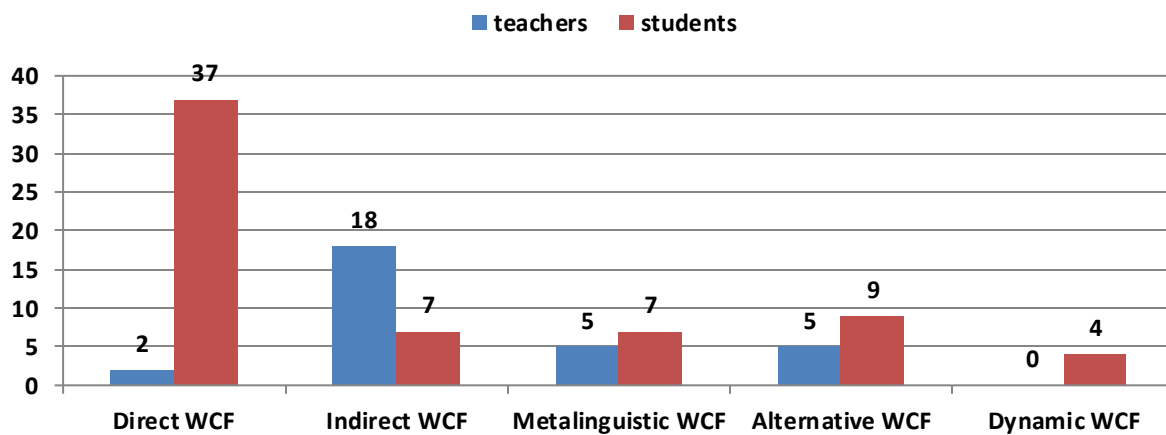
Figure 1. Teachers' and students' preferences for WCF strategies

As can be seen in Figure 1, there is a significant difference between the frequencies of students' and teachers' preferences towards WCF strategies. In fact, students tend to favour direct WCF the most, with 37 frequencies of occurrence and dynamic WCF the least, with only four frequencies. In contrast, indirect WCF is the most preferred type of written corrective feedback by teachers with 18 frequencies of occurrence, while they showed no preference for dynamic WCF. Based on these results, it can be deduced that the second hypothesis postulating the existence of a mismatch between students' and teachers' preferences for WCF strategies is confirmed.

4.3. Results from interviews with teachers

Interviews with teachers were conducted to explain the outcomes of the questionnaires, specifically the mismatch between students' and teachers' preferences for written corrective feedback (WCF) techniques. Teachers were asked why the vast majority (28 out of 30) do not prefer direct WCF despite it being the most preferred technique by students. The responses revealed that teachers are aware of the importance and effectiveness of direct WCF, but they reported not using it. To justify their reluctance, they provided statements such as, "I cannot correct the papers of classes made up of more than 100 students and provide direct written corrective feedback for every student" (Participant 1), "I know direct written corrective feedback provides concrete and visual guidance for students to improve their writing abilities, but it is too demanding on the part of the teacher considering the large number of students in class" (Participant 4), and "I can provide direct written corrective feedback only if the number of students in groups does not exceed 30 or 40 at most. When the number of students in class exceeds 100, it is impossible" (Participant 5). Participant 3 offered a different reason, attributing teachers' reluctance to a lack of necessary pedagogical training. Based on these arguments, it is evident that teachers are aware of the effectiveness of direct WCF compared to other feedback techniques. However, they do not use it due to the large class sizes or a lack of pedagogical training.

5. INTEGRATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This section aims to integrate, interpret, and discuss the data obtained from the different instruments of the study. The experiment outcomes prove that direct WCF is an effective formative assessment tool for enhancing students' writing skills. The improvement in the average score of the students who received direct WCF from 6,93 to 12,15 highlights the utility of this corrective feedback method in learning writing. Conversely, the lack of improvement in the control group, which did not receive any WCF, underscores the necessity of feedback for continuous improvement in writing proficiency. These results align with similar studies conducted in the Moroccan context, such as Ayad and Bouziane (2020), Said and Mouzrati

(2018), and Abderrahim and Tibor (2022), all of which found that the provision of direct WCF significantly improves students' writing proficiency.

However, the results of the questionnaires revealed a mismatch between students' and teachers' preferences for WCF strategies. Students prefer direct WCF because it provides explicit corrections, which they find easier to understand and apply. In contrast, teachers prefer indirect WCF, recognizing the efficacy of direct feedback but finding it impractical due to the time and effort required to provide individual, detailed corrections to a large number of students. This means that the educational environments where writing is taught, precisely overcrowded classes, prevent teachers from providing direct WCF. These findings corroborate the research outcomes of Ouahidi and Lamkhanter (2017), Mamad (2024), and Zyad and Bouziane (2020), who demonstrated that Moroccan university students often do not receive WCF from their teachers for various reasons.

For example, Ouahidi and Lamkhanter (2017) found that most students in the English Department of Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco, do not receive any WCF from their teachers, citing large class sizes and traditional pedagogical beliefs among teachers as the main constraints. Similarly, Mamad (2024) criticized teachers for assigning scores without explaining or commenting on students' mistakes and errors. Furthermore, Zyad and Bouziane (2020) monitored a group of Moroccan university students' writing accuracy over time. They identified minimal improvement in the drafts of students who did not receive WCF from their teachers.

The study's findings substantiate the theoretical arguments that the WCF provision promotes students' writing proficiency (Sheen et al., 2009; Diab, 2016; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris, 1999). The results also align with similar empirical studies conducted in different contexts. For example, Farjadnasab and Khodashenas (2017) conducted an experimental study on the impact of providing various types of WCF on 79 Iranian students' writing accuracy. They found that direct WCF brought about more significant improvement to students' writing proficiency in comparison to the other types of WCF. Similarly, Sarvestani and Pishkar (2015) found that students' performance improved significantly after eight weeks of teaching writing with the provision of WCF. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2021) investigated the preferences of 117 Tai University students. They found that students benefitted from direct and explicit WCF due to their educational background, which emphasizes accuracy and teacher authority. Similarly, Ashoori et al. (2014) examined the efficacy of various corrective feedback techniques in improving the accuracy and fluency of students' writing in Iran. The study found that direct feedback (providing the correct form) led to immediate improvement in accuracy, while indirect feedback (indicating the presence of an error without correction) promoted long-term learning and self-correction abilities.

Considering the study's findings collectively, it can be concluded that while the experiment provided evidence that direct WCF is a prerequisite for improving students' writing accuracy, the insights gathered from interviews revealed practical constraints that present real challenges to its provision. Specifically, the large class sizes in the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes and the differing preferences among students and teachers for written corrective feedback strategies are significant obstacles.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary objectives of this quasi-experimental study were (i) to investigate the effect of direct WCF on students' writing accuracy, (ii) to identify EFL teachers' and students' preferences for WCF techniques, and (iii) to detect the sources of difficulty teachers encounter in providing WCF. The findings imply a significant gap between effective teaching practices and classroom behaviour. Despite evidence that written corrective feedback improves students' writing accuracy, its lack of implementation by teachers suggests several implications:

- Teachers may need enhanced training and professional development to emphasize the importance of providing direct written corrective feedback and equip them with effective strategies.
- The School of Arts and Humanities of Meknes, Morocco, is urged to allocate more resources and support for teachers to provide direct WCF, potentially addressing issues such as large class sizes and heavy workloads that hinder this practice.
- Educational policies and curricula might need to be revised to incorporate mandatory WCF as a standard practice, ensuring all students benefit from it.
- There is a need for increased awareness and dissemination of research findings among teachers, highlighting the benefits of direct WCF and encouraging its integration into their teaching practices.
- Students are advised to exchange papers with classmates, probably more advanced ones, and provide constructive feedback to each other to make up for the absence of WCF from their teachers.

In conclusion, this quasi-experimental study has demonstrated that providing direct WCF enhances students' writing accuracy. Despite its effectiveness, the English Department teachers at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes do not widely utilize this formative assessment tool due to the significant workload of grading papers from large classes. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that further research in this area is warranted. Future studies should aim to investigate larger and more diverse samples. Therefore, it is recommended that this study be replicated in English departments at other Moroccan universities. Additionally, future research should include students beyond the S4 level.

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