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The effect of written corrective feedback on grammatical accuracy of EFL students: An improvement over previous unfocused designs

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) in the improvement of language learners' grammatical accuracy has been a topic of interest in SLA studies for the past couple of decades. The present study reports the findings of a three-month study investigating the effect of direct unfocused WCF on the grammatical accuracy of elementary students in an EFL context. The researchers selected two intact classes totaling 33 students, and assigned each to a direct feedback group (n = 16) and a control group (n = 17). The students produced eight pieces of writing (a pretest, three writing tasks along with their revisions, and a posttest) from which their grammatical accuracy was obtained. The results indicated that while the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the revision of the three writing tasks, no significant difference was found when the two groups produced a new piece of writing after a one-month interval. The study concludes that accuracy improvement caused by unfocused WCF during the revision process does not extend to EFL learners' future writing when no feedback is available, at least at the elementary level.

Keywords: error correction; grammatical accuracy; grammatical error; writing; written corrective feedback

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Introduction

The efficacy of WCF in L2 writing classes has been the subject of much controversy over the past three decades. In the area of error correction, provision of WCF was assumed an indispensable part of writing classes by both language instructors and researchers until Truscott (1996) accentuated the inadequacy of any firm evidence supporting the unquestioned belief that WCF is effective in improving learners' writing accuracy. As Truscott (1999) put it, "the literature was full of confident assertions and assumptions that grammar correction is beneficial and that it must be a part of second-language writing classes. Dissenting voices were almost non-existent" (p. 111). Teachers were simply expected to provide WCF, and failure or unwillingness to do so would have been frowned upon.

Since Truscott (1996) made his claims that WCF is ineffective in and harmful to L2 development, in a series of debates and dialogues, many articles have attempted to argue for or against its effectiveness (Bitchener, 2009; Bruton, 2009, 2010; Chandler, 2004, 2009; Ferris, 1999 2003, 2004; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004; Truscott, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Xu, 2009). The main concerns of these debates have revolved around the designs of the studies done on the effectiveness of WCF as well as the validity of the conclusions which were made based on their findings. The present article reviews these design and validity issues, and explores how direct unfocused WCF affects the grammatical accuracy of elementary EFL language learners during revision of the same writing and on a new writing assignment after a one-month interval.

Literature Review

Due to the widespread presuppositions and sweeping generalizations about the effectiveness of corrective feedback, most researchers in the field have attempted to prove WCF is effective in helping learners improve their writing accuracy. However, many of them have based their claims on the findings of research studies which might suffer from overt design flaws. The first and probably the most obvious design problem of all is the lack of a control group in a number of studies supporting the effectiveness of WCF (Chandler, 2000; Ferris, 1997; Ferris, & Helt, 2000). It is not clear whether learners' accuracy improvement was only the result of the provided WCF.

Another design problem of the previous studies the results of which also offer support for WCF is the lack of a delayed posttest to see whether or not improvements made during text revision by WCF groups extend to a new writing task when there is no feedback available (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 2006; Ferris, & Roberts, 2001). There are also a number of research studies the results of which oppose those of the above-mentioned studies by offering evidence against the effectiveness of WCF (Kepner, 1991; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998). Nevertheless, they suffer from some design problems, too. For example, Kepner (1991) did not administer a pretest in her research which rendered the results of the study unreliable. Although the study conducted by Polio *et al.* (1998) did not suffer from the flaws discussed above, their use of different instruments in the two tests might have influenced the findings of the study.Following Ferris (2004), Bitchener (2008) listed a number of design flaws that have been identified in previous research studies: (a) the lack of a control group to compare its improvement to that of experimental groups, (b) the failure to measure learners' accuracy improvement in new pieces of writing after an interval by means of a delayed posttest, (c) the use of instruments which are considered invalid measures of learners' progress, and finally (d) the targeting of more than a limited number of error categories at a time. Although the first three design problems unanimously have been addressed by the recent studies, the fourth issue has resulted in further controversy. On the one hand, a number of focused studies narrowed the focus of WCF and examined its effectiveness in learners' use of

two functions of English article system to express first and second mention (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009). On the other hand, unfocused studies like that of Truscott and Hsu (2008) either did not approve of the validity of the fourth claim or pursued to answer a question different from that of focused studies. Although they take it for granted that WCF helps learners improve their writing accuracy during the revision process, Truscott and Hsu (2008) conducted an unfocused study in which they compared the grammatical accuracy of an indirect WCF group to a control group in an immediate posttest during revision and in a delayed posttest. The results of their study indicated that while the WCF group significantly outperformed the control group during the revision of the previously written drafts, this difference did not extend to the delayed posttest. They took the findings of their study as evidence against the effectiveness of WCF in the long run. Nonetheless, in an analysis of their study, Bruton (2009) suggests that since it is difficult to make sure the errors made in the delayed posttest are the same as those targeted in the immediate posttest, the conclusions made by unfocused studies are not valid and these studies fail to show any evidence regarding the effectiveness of WCF.

Contrary to the findings of unfocused studies, the results of the afore-mentioned focused studies were in favor of WCF and showed that WCF has a significant short-term as well as long-term impact on language learners' grammatical accuracy. Nonetheless, Xu (2009) argues that these studies overgeneralize from a narrow focus, that is, learners' accuracy gain in the use of two functions of English articles does not show evidence in support of WCF, in general. She also warns that "we must make sure that increased control over the two specific functions of articles is not gained at the cost of other functions of articles or other [grammatical] features" (p. 271). Xu (2009) further suggests that the experimental groups could easily discover the research focus from the design of the two studies, which might influence their performance in the posttests.

Moreover, having compared the efficacy of focused WCF and unfocused WCF, Ellis *et al.* (2008) found that there was no significant difference between a focused group who only received WCF on article errors and an unfocused group who received WCF on article errors as well as other grammatical errors in the accuracy with which they used English article system in a delayed posttest. This finding suggests that the significant impact observed for error correction in focused studies may not be necessarily because of the targeting of one grammatical error; rather it could be attributed to the grammatical category being simply "treatable" which is an error "related to a linguistic structure that occurs in a rule-governed way", and "the student writer can be pointed to a grammar book or set of rules to resolve the problem" (Ferris, 2011, p. 36). Therefore, more focused studies are needed to investigate the impact of WCF on other aspects of grammar.

Leaving aside the design flaws attributed to focused and unfocused studies, the validity of the conclusions which are made based on the findings of these studies should also be scrutinized. To the present authors, each of the designs can only help researchers answer specific questions. It is neither valid to conclude from the results of unfocused studies that WCF is a futile practice, nor is it logical to argue that providing WCF is always of pedagogical value just because it is effective in the improvement of one narrow aspect of grammar. Ellis *et al.* (2008) acknowledge that the studies which have indicated CF is effective were all narrowly focused and only investigated the effects of CF on specific grammatical errors, and ascertain that there is a possibility that comprehensive WCF is ineffective or even harmful to learners' L2 development as argued by Truscott (1996).

In typical writing classrooms, teachers do not usually provide WCF on one narrow aspect of grammar, nor do they expect learners to become a better reviser of a particular writing assignment. What teachers really believe and practice, and what learners really expect teachers to do is to provide comprehensive error correction, that is, WCF on all the grammatical errors (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Lee, 2003, 2004; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Therefore, in an attempt to simulate what

actually occurs in most writing classrooms, the present study seeks to investigate the impact of unfocused WCF on the grammatical accuracy of elementary EFL learners during revision and on a new writing task.

In this study, the researchers attempted to account for the common design flaw of unfocused studies discussed above. In order to make sure the errors made in the delayed posttest are the same as those targeted in the immediate posttest, certain steps were taken: First, the writing tasks were guided and the topics were chosen based on the learners' textbook which required them to use certain grammatical structures. Second, three writing tasks along with revision were included in this study so as to make sure the learner errors were addressed many times. Besides, because the participants were elementary students, they used a narrow range of grammar which caused the given feedback to address all the grammatical features frequently used at this level.

Research Questions

The present study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Does direct unfocused WCF help elementary EFL students significantly outperform those who do not receive error correction during the revision process?
2. Does direct unfocused WCF help elementary EFL students significantly outperform those who do not receive error correction in a posttest after an interval?

Method

Participants

Two intact classes composed of 35 male students who ranged in age from 15 to 20 participated in this study. They were elementary EFL students of a private language institute in Tehran, Iran. Due to mortality effect, only the scores of 33 of them were analyzed (experimental group = 16 students; control group = 17 students). The students either had been studying at a lower proficiency level and passed the institute's achievement tests, or took the institute's Placement Test to enter this course. Both classes met for two sessions a week for three months. The instructor, who was one of the researchers, was the same for both classes.

The rationale for selecting elementary students was mainly on the grounds that it is at this level that a) teachers are frequently faced with the dilemma of whether or not to provide WCF, b) learners are more probable to produce errors when they write, and finally it is at this stage that c) learners are most teacher-dependent and teachers' reactions have a profound effect on their autonomy.

Materials

A writing assignment on describing a best friend was used as the pretest of the study. For the three writing tasks which had to be revised, the students described themselves for the first one, and wrote narratives about a series of pictures for the second and third ones. For the posttest, the students were asked to describe a famous person. The dominant structures used in the writing assignments were intended to be the same.

Procedure

Before the semester started, the head of the institute as well as the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and signed a consent form. At the first session, the participants were told their writing samples would be used for research purposes and were provided with an explanation about how their scores on the writing tasks would affect their semester's final overall score. In order to motivate all the participants to take the writing assignments more seriously, the instructor/rater scored both groups after each of the three writing tasks and their revisions. However, in order not to make them sensitive to the focus of the study (i.e., grammatical accuracy), content, organization, vocabulary, as well as mechanics were also included in the scores. In this way, learners would not avoid using grammatical structures they were not certain about (Bachman, 1990). Draft-Specific Scoring (DSS), a technique devised by Nemati and Azizi (2013), was also used to assure the students that if they improved upon their first drafts in the revision process, their scores on the writing tasks would change to those of revisions. In this way, both groups would be more likely to take the revision process more seriously, even the group who did not receive WCF. Besides, providing some students with WCF while a control group receives no CF, as is the case with previous studies, leads to practical and ethical problems (Ferris, 2004).

In the first week, both groups were provided with an acceptable writing sample and then were asked to produce their first writing assignment which served as the pretest of the study. From week three to eight, the two groups produced three in-class writing assignments alongside their revisions. For example, in week three, the students wrote their first drafts and handed them to the teacher. Next week, both groups were given back their scored drafts so as to revise them in the classroom for possibly a better score. While the experimental group received direct WCF on their first drafts, the control group received no error correction. Both groups were also given enough time to consult their books during the in-class writing revision; however, in order to keep the feedback in written form only, neither teacher nor peer feedback was allowed during the revision process. Because when correction is followed by oral or written metalinguistic explanation, it becomes impossible to attribute the results of the study to only one or more variables (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a). The other two writing tasks and their revisions also followed the same procedure. In week 12, after a four-week interval, the students wrote their final writing assignments which were taken as the posttest of the study. All the three writing assignments alongside their revisions and the posttest were collected for further analysis.

Error Treatment

On each of the three writing tasks, while the experimental group received direct unfocused WCF to revise their previously written drafts, the control group received no feedback except for a general comment on the content of their writing. The provision of direct WCF included "crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme, inserting a missing word or morpheme, and writing the correct form above or near to the erroneous form" (Ellis, 2009, p. 99). Although one may claim that direct WCF may not lead to deep thinking while students revise their drafts, with elementary writers, given their limited linguistic knowledge, the use of indirect feedback tends to make revision tasks burdensome (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Chandler (2003) believes that direct feedback works best when learners revise their previously written drafts, whereas students learn more from indirect feedback. On the contrary, Ferris (2010) is of the opinion that direct correction, providing explicit information to learners, is a better choice than indirect correction if a study looks for evidence for acquisition. Although certain advantages and disadvantages are being attributed to direct and indirect feedback and their different types, all in all, most studies found no significant difference between the effectiveness of direct and indirect correction (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Semke, 1984).

It is worthy of notice that since the learners were at the elementary level, the addressed grammatical features were also very rudimentary. In fact, only grammar rules which were studied before or were being studied during the semester were addressed.

Scoring and Analysis

All the scoring was done by one of the researchers who taught the two classes. The overall score for each of the writing tasks was out of 100 comprising of content (30), organization (20), vocabulary (20), mechanics (5) as well as language (25). Although the rater used ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs *et al*., 1981) to score learners' writing assignments and revisions, the main data, namely the scores on learners' grammatical accuracy (language), was based on the following criteria: (a) subject-verb agreement, (b) tense, (c) number, (d) word order, (e) articles, (f) pronouns, and (g) prepositions. In order to examine the reliability of the scoring regarding grammatical accuracy, the pieces of writing from the pretest were re-scored by the same rater after a one-month interval. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r) for the two markings of the pretest was .87.

Descriptive statistics for the two groups on the pretest, the three writing tasks and their revisions, as well as the posttest were first calculated. Then, in order to examine the effect of WCF on learners' grammatical accuracy during the revision process and on a new piece of writing after an interval, a one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted. With the design of this study, as three writing tasks along with their revisions were included to account for the common design flaw of unfocused studies, and since task 2 and task 3 were more demanding than task 1, the repeated measures ANOVA would not have yielded reliable results. Therefore, in order to answer the research questions, the two groups were compared to each other regarding their grammatical accuracy in each of the writing assignments.

Results

Table 1 below indicates the descriptive statistics for the two groups on each of the writing assignments. The scores obtained in the pretest were analyzed to see whether the two classes were significantly different with respect to their grammatical accuracy. The results of a one-way ANOVA showed that there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups before the study began (F (1, 31) = .26, p = .61).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for experimental and control groups

Experimental Group (n = 16)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Control Group (n = 17)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	17.93	2.01	Pretest	17.78	2.86
Writing Task 1	18.46	2.16	Writing Task 1	18.35	2.79
Revision 1	22.46	3.09	Revision 1	19.00	3.39
Writing Task 2	17.53	2.26	Writing Task 2	17.35	2.59
Revision 2	20.66	3.37	Revision 2	17.71	2.78
Writing Task 3	18.60	1.76	Writing Task 3	18.07	3.02
Revision 3	22.73	2.57	Revision 3	18.50	3.00
Posttest	19.26	1.83	Posttest	18.78	2.63

In order to examine the impact of direct unfocused WCF on students' grammatical accuracy in their subsequent revisions, a one-way between subjects ANOVA was run to analyze the scores of the two groups on the three writing tasks and their revisions. The results are presented in Table 2. While no meaningful difference was found between the two groups on writing task 1 (F = .002, p = .96), writing task 2 (F = .00, p = .98), and writing task 3 (F = .21, p = .65), a significant difference was found between the grammatical accuracy of the two groups on revision 1 (F = 8.39, p = .007), revision 2 (F = 6.70, p = .015), and revision 3 (F = 17.35, p = .00). In other words, the students who received direct WCF outperformed those who did not in the revision of the three writing tasks.

Table 2
Results of one-way between subjects ANOVA for three writing tasks and their revisions

	F	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Writing Task 1	.002	31	.96	.10
Revision 1	8.39	31	.007	3.46
Writing Task 2	.00	31	.98	.17
Revision 2	6.70	31	.015	2.95
Writing Task 3	.21	31	.65	.52
Revision 3	17.35	31	.00	4.23

Nevertheless, a comparison between the scores of the two groups in the pretest and posttest (as indicated in Table 3) showed that the two groups were not significantly different with respect to their grammatical accuracy at the beginning (F = .26, p = .61) and at the end of the course (F = .41, p = .53). It can be concluded that provision of WCF did not cause any significant difference in the grammatical accuracy of the experimental group.

Table 3
Results of one-way between subjects ANOVA for pretest and posttest

	F	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Pretest	.26	31	.61	.14
Posttest	.41	31	.53	.48

In sum, on the one hand, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on revision 1, revision 2, and revision 3. On the other hand, the mean scores of the two groups on pretest, writing task 1, writing task 2, writing task 3, and posttest were close and the differences were not statistically significant. Nevertheless, as indicated above in Table 2 and Table 3, the mean differences of writing task 3 (*.52*) and posttest (*.48*) were greater than those of pretest (*.14*), writing task 1 (*.10*), and writing task 2 (*.17*). It can be concluded that although the difference in the two groups' grammatical accuracy was not statistically significant on the posttest, the experimental group slightly improved more than control group did.

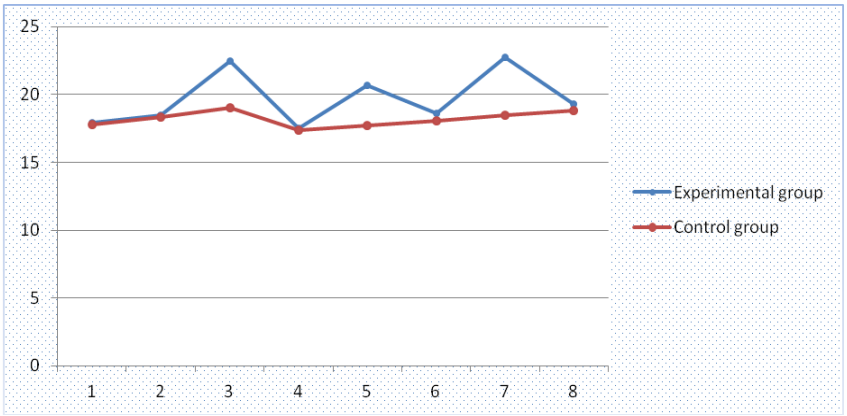

Figure 1. Mean scores of the two groups from pretest to posttest

As seen in Figure 1, the scores of the two groups dramatically decreased in the second writing task compared to those of pretest and the first writing task. The change in the difficulty of writing tasks two and three as well as the posttest is the reason of this drop. Nevertheless, since the scores of the two groups were compared only with regard to each other in a particular writing task, the difficulty of the tasks did not have any effect on our analysis.

One interesting finding of the present study, as seen in Figure 1, is that not only the experimental group but also the control group improved their grammatical accuracy in the revision of the three writing tasks. The results of a paired *t*-test, as shown in Table 4, suggest that the mean scores of the control group on revision 1, revision 2, and revision 3, respectively, are significantly different from their mean scores on writing task 1, writing task 2, and writing task 3 ($t = -3.22, p = .007; t = -2.68, p = .01; t = 3.12, p = .008$).

Table 4
Results of paired t-test for control group in three writing tasks and their revisions

	Writing 1 - Revision 1	Writing 2 - Revision 2	Writing 3 - Revision 3
t	-3.22	-2.68	3.12
df	16	16	16
Sig.(2-tailed)	.007	.01	.008
Mean Difference	.64	.35	.42

Two points are noteworthy on account of the results. Firstly, the level of the students were elementary; therefore, there was much to learn and a simple review of grammar focus in the particular unit the class was studying, would give them some clues as to how to improve their writing drafts. Secondly, DSS kept the students motivated and they did not necessarily need WCF to try to revise their drafts in the first place.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that while the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group regarding their grammatical accuracy in the revision of the three writing tasks, the two groups showed no significant difference in producing a new piece of writing on the posttest after an interval. On the one hand, the findings of the present study corroborate those of previous studies which found that provision of WCF leads to error reduction when students are required to revise their previously written drafts, and that this error reduction is significantly higher than that of no feedback group (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). On the other hand, the analysis of the students' scores on the posttest confirms the findings of Truscott and Hsu's (2008) study that this error reduction does not extend to a new writing task performed after an interval. This finding is apparently in contrast with the results of recent focused studies where WCF groups significantly outperformed control groups in the use of two functions of English article system in the delayed posttest (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b; Ellis *et al*., 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen *et al*., 2009). Nevertheless, as discussed above, since each of the designs investigated the impact of different constructs on learners' grammatical accuracy, it is not logical to expect similar results. What is important, though, is the question researchers attempted to answer.

To the best of the authors' knowledge and as Lee's (2004) study suggests, most language instructors are concerned with whether their attempts at correcting learners' written productions in general are worth their while and effort. Therefore, if one is to indicate that WCF is effective all the time and with respect to all aspects of grammar, he or she must necessarily include more than just a few easily treatable errors, because providing WCF on one grammatical point which is the focus of the classroom's lesson was not, is not, and probably will not be anything but the quintessence of language teaching, whether it is significantly effective or not. In fact, it is really hard to imagine when a language instructor teaches present tense and learners make errors regarding its use, he or she has mixed feelings about providing them with corrective feedback. That is why the present study focused on six grammatical categories, not one simple treatable grammatical error. Nevertheless, given the above-mentioned arguments against unfocused designs, this study included three writing tasks to maximize the chance of all probable errors in the posttest to be addressed during the revision of the writing tasks. Besides, the instructor/rater only addressed the grammar rules which were being studied during the semester or had been studied in previous semesters. Therefore, considering learners' language proficiency, only a limited number of errors, under each of the error categories, were addressed which shows the chance of most errors being corrected before the posttest during the revisions was very high.

As a whole, the results of the present study keep Truscott's (1996, 1999) case against grammar correction open to further scrutiny. In fact, it is yet to be investigated what constitutes a case for or against WCF. In our view, although the findings of focused studies may have important implications for error correction, improvement in grammatical accuracy over two functions of English article system during the revision process or in a delayed posttest does not qualify as a case for effectiveness of WCF. The results of these studies, at the very best, suggest that WCF is effective when it is focused, but fail to answer the broader question of whether or not to correct learners' grammatical errors, in general.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how direct unfocused WCF affects the grammatical accuracy of elementary EFL students during the revision process as well as on a delayed posttest. With respect to the first objective, it was found that provision of WCF resulted in significantly higher grammatical accuracy in the revisions made by experimental group compared to those of control group. Concerning the second objective, the findings indicated that although the experimental group slightly outperformed the control group regarding grammatical accuracy on a new writing task, the difference was not statistically significant and the error reduction during the revision process did not extend to the posttest. In conclusion, provision of typical written corrective feedback, without any follow-up teacher-student interaction, only helps elementary EGP students reduce their grammatical errors during the revision process, and it does not have a significant impact on their overall grammatical accuracy in the future on a new writing task. However, we do not argue for total abandonment of WCF; rather we believe it must be up to teachers whether or not to provide WCF. In our view, provision of WCF must be regarded as only one of the options teachers have for improving learners' grammatical accuracy. In fact, based on their previous experience with similar students, the number of students, learners' age and proficiency level, purpose of the course, available time and other classroom limitations, as professionals, teachers should make their own professional decisions.

Call for Further Research

Although the findings of the present study have some implications to consider, especially with regard to elementary students, it has some limitations. Due to the small sample size and the inclusion of only male students, one may treat the results of this study with some skepticism. This study also failed to investigate possible variations in the effectiveness of unfocused WCF in the improvement of different aspects of grammar. In other words, it did not delve into how WCF affected different aspects of grammar. For example, there is a possibility that unfocused WCF results in the accurate use of English articles even on a new writing task, but not tenses. Therefore, further study is needed to address this problem by examining these variations. Further research is also required to investigate the extent to which these findings apply to language learners from other proficiency levels. One factor which has not been addressed by previous studies is the impact of learners' motivation on the incorporation of WCF to their future writing. As with many researchers, taking for granted that WCF must be necessarily effective, Fazio (2001) tried to justify the ineffectiveness of WCF in her study by attributing it to "students' lack of attentiveness to [teacher] corrections and the pedagogical context in which the investigation was conducted" (p. 247). This justification is valuable in that it keeps open the possibility of WCF being effective with certain students in particular contexts while being ineffective with others in different contexts. As Byram (2013) suggests, educational context in which language teaching occurs has a profound impact the amount and quality of learning. According to Ellis (2013), whereas most teacher guides emphasize the affective aspects of corrective feedback, the SLA research has been mainly concerned with cognitive aspects of error correction. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate the affective impact of WCF on language learners with different characteristics.

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