

A Three-Stage Model for Implementing Focused Written Corrective Feedback

Sin Wang Chong

This article aims to show how the findings from written corrective feedback (WCF) research can be applied in practice. One particular kind of WCF—focused WCF—is brought into the spotlight. The article first summarizes major findings from focused WCF research to reveal the potential advantages of correcting a few pre-selected language items instead of all errors. It is argued that the majority of the focused WCF research, which has adopted an experimental or quasi-experimental design, has had limited pedagogical implications for second language (L2) writing teachers. Thus, the second section puts forward a three-stage model for operationalizing focused WCF, which includes selecting the focus, teaching the focus, and reinforcing the focus. Pedagogical ideas will be included in each of the stages to give writing teachers a clear idea of how to justify the selection of a language focus and implement WCF in a systematic manner.

Cet article a comme objectif de démontrer comment les résultats de recherche portant sur la rétroaction corrective écrite (RCE) peuvent être appliqués à la pratique. La recherche touche plus précisément un type particulier de rétroaction corrective écrite, la RCE ciblée. L'article débute par un résumé des résultats majeurs découlant de la recherche sur la RCE ciblée et ainsi, révèle les bienfaits potentiels de corriger quelques items langagiers présélectionnés au lieu de toutes les erreurs. Nous faisons valoir que la majorité de la recherche sur la RCE ciblée, qui a adopté une méthodologie expérimentale ou quasi-expérimentale, a eu des retombées pédagogiques limitées pour les enseignants de l'écriture en langue seconde. La deuxième section avance donc un modèle à trois étapes visant de rendre fonctionnelle la RCE ciblée et qui implique, entre autres, l'identification, l'enseignement et le renforcement des items ciblés. Chaque étape sera accompagnée de concepts pédagogiques de sorte à donner aux enseignants une vision claire pour la sélection d'items langagiers et la mise en œuvre systématique de la RCE ciblée.

KEYWORDS: written corrective feedback, direct feedback, focused feedback, error correction

Correcting errors in students' compositions is never an easy task. Although English L2 writing teachers burn the midnight oil giving written feedback on language errors, research has shown that students rarely pay attention to or

act upon those comments, especially when feedback is given alongside scores (Lee, 2017). Worse still, the effort of those teachers who diligently point out students' errors is sometimes viewed negatively. For example, teachers are sometimes labelled as "composition slaves" and "paternalistic figures" (Lee, 2009, p. 13). In the course of giving feedback, teachers have a difficult time deciding which language features to comment on. Without doubt, responding to students' language errors in writing is a daunting and challenging task for many teachers.

Not only teachers but also researchers debate the effectiveness of written error correction, or written corrective feedback (WCF). Since Truscott's (1996) controversial claim that WCF is ineffective and even detrimental to L2 students' acquisition, writing researchers have been investigating different practices of WCF. In order to refute Truscott's claims, researchers have examined direct WCF (indication of errors and provision of correct form) and indirect WCF (indication of errors), focused WCF (correction of specific error types) and unfocused WCF (correction of all error types) (Ferris, 2011). Although some of these attempts have been criticized because of their limitations in research design, the plethora of studies on this topic provide support for the notion that, in general, students who receive WCF in any form achieve a higher standard of linguistic accuracy than those who do not receive any feedback from teachers. The current debate has now shifted to considering whether focused WCF exerts a greater positive impact on students than unfocused WCF (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013). One argument in favor of focused WCF is that students will find the feedback less overwhelming, which makes revision more manageable (Bitchener, 2008). While this remains an area without conclusive evidence, and is therefore worth exploring, a more pressing issue (especially to L2 writing teachers) is how to implement WCF in their own classrooms. One of the issues close to the heart of teachers is related to the practice of focused WCF. In particular, research does not offer much insight into a "tried-and-true" way of selecting an appropriate language focus that will benefit students' linguistic development. In this article, I will summarize major findings in focused WCF studies and point out their limitations to inform practice. Next, I will introduce a pedagogical approach to implementing focused WCF that comprises three stages: selecting the focus, teaching the focus, and reinforcing the focus.

What Research Tells (Does Not Tell) Us About Focused WCF

Most of the recent studies on focused WCF have examined the effectiveness of WCF on the accurate use of the English articles (definite, indefinite, and zero) (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Farrokhi & Sattarpour, 2012; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Stefanou & Révész, 2015). In terms of research design, all the studies cited above included a control group that did not receive any WCF

and at least one treatment group that received WCF in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of WCF. Moreover, most of these studies measured effectiveness of WCF in terms of how well students transferred the acquired linguistic knowledge to the next piece of writing. These recent WCF studies provide conclusive findings in favour of responding to language errors in a focused manner. From the findings, focused WCF appears to exert a greater positive influence than does unfocused WCF or no WCF, at least in terms of the acquisition of English articles among adult L2 students.

WCF in the Real World

Unfortunately, given the different goals of researchers and teachers, the findings from the existing WCF literature cannot readily be translated into practice. For example, in the above findings, researchers selected the English article system as the target language feature whereas writing teachers have a much broader array of concerns: student factors (e.g., students' preference of WCF, the effectiveness of focused WCF on students' acquisition of other language features), school factors (e.g., school's expectation and culture), and educational system factors (e.g., exam-oriented systems that place a premium on students' linguistic accuracy) (Carless, 2011). In many of the ESL contexts in which these studies were conducted, the school, students, and parents have high expectations for writing instruction. Teachers are expected to correct all errors in students' compositions. In some extreme situations, how "diligent" teachers correct is taken into consideration in teaching appraisals. Moreover, students prefer to receive more teacher feedback even though they do not always use it in their revisions (Elwood & Bode, 2014). In a study conducted in Hong Kong, even students with a lower writing proficiency wanted their teachers to respond to all of their errors (Lee, 2008). Other studies conducted in multilingual classrooms in North America have revealed similar findings. For example, Schulz (2001) conducted a survey on more than 1,000 students from Colombia and the United States to elicit their perception of grammar instruction and error correction. More than 90% of both groups of students preferred teachers to focus on correcting their errors. Despite the expectation on writing teachers to correct errors in a comprehensive manner, other potential inhibiting factors need to be considered, namely time constraint and the potential negative effect on students' self-esteem with too much red ink.

To address the practical needs of writing teachers teaching in the secondary education context, I propose a three-stage model for implementing focused WCF in order to maximize the effectiveness of this feedback practice. When teachers are less overloaded by giving feedback through the adoption of focused WCF, they can focus more on devising student-centred strategies prior to, during, and after giving WCF. More importantly, I aim to provide a pedagogical approach that aligns feedback with instruction and, in turn, provides a stronger justification for teachers to adopt a focused approach in

marking errors in their own schools (Chong, 2017). Grounded in the notion of “feedback as a new form of instruction” (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Kulhavy, 1977), this model of WCF proposes three cyclical stages: selecting the focus, teaching the focus, and reinforcing the focus (Figure 1).

Selecting the Focus

Student-Focused

There are two ways to select one or more language focuses for a student. One way is more student-directed: The teacher gives a checklist of important grammatical items to students. Upon completing their writing, students evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and check the items that they most want the teacher to comment on. Accordingly, teachers give feedback only to those items checked by the students (Figure 2). It is also possible for teachers to negotiate the items to be listed on the checklist with students. Alternatively,

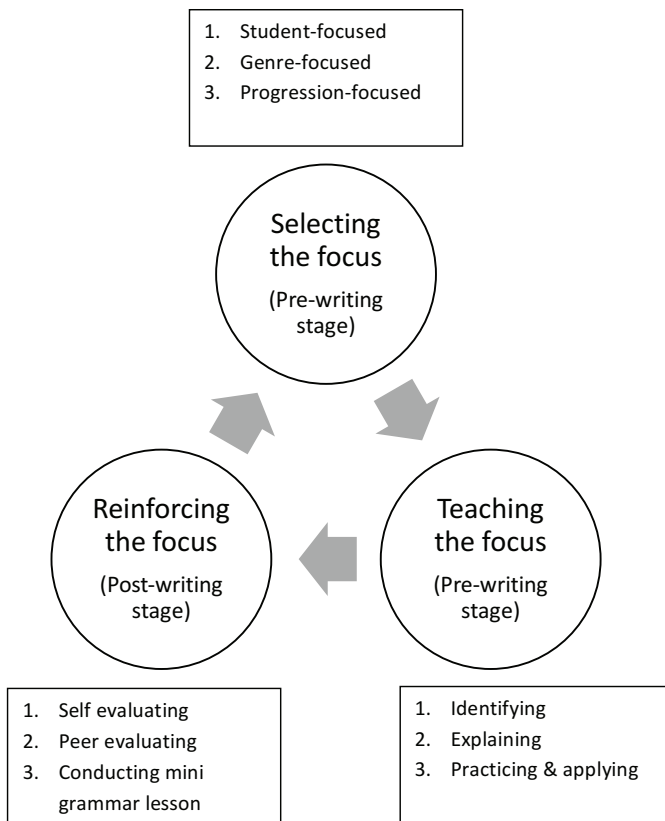


Figure 1: A three-stage model for implementing focused WCF

Marking focuses

Put at least 2 ticks next to the grammar focuses that you want me to respond to:

✓	Words and phrases for making arguments		Prepositions
	Tenses, gerunds, infinitives		Word choice
	Spelling		Sentence structures
	Agreement		_____

Figure 2: An example of language focus checklist for students

teachers can leave one of the boxes blank for students to write down any linguistic item that poses a challenge.

Another time-saving strategy is to ask students to keep an error log (Ferris, 2002). An error log is a table kept and completed by the students regarding the distribution of the types of error in each piece of writing (Table 1). Over time, the error logs can provide “valuable assessment information” for teachers to develop a focus for giving feedback (Lee, 2017, p. 21). Moreover, since it is the students who input and calculate the number of errors on the logs, time can be saved for teachers to focus on formulating appropriate feedback strategies in response to individual students’ needs.

Table 1
An Error Log (adapted from Lee, 2017, p. 21)

Type of error	Error code	No. of errors	Error ratio ^a	Error gravity ranking ^b
Verb tenses	v.	8	0.4	1
Subject-verb agreement	ag.	5	0.25	2
Spelling	sp.	4	0.2	3
Part of speech	p.o.s.	3	0.15	4
Total no. of errors		20		

^a the number of errors in each type of error is divided by the total number of errors. The larger ratio indicates that the error is more serious and teachers should pay attention to it. ^b Error types are ranked from the most serious (marked by “1”) to the least serious (marked by “4”).

Genre-Focused

Another approach to selecting a language focus for feedback is to make reference to the genre at hand. Hyland (2003) defines genre as “abstract, socially recognized ways of using language” (p. 21). In each genre or text-type, there may be an obligatory use of certain language items. For example, in one of the studies discussed earlier, Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, and Takashima (2008) claimed that the selection of articles as the language focus was justified because the subsequent writing task was a narrative, in which there is a high frequency of the first mention/second mention rule. In a similar vein, writing teachers can justify their selection of a given language focus by referring to its significance in the target genre or text-type. Table 2 shows some of the writing units in a Hong Kong secondary school writing curriculum for Secondary 4 to 5 (Grades 10 to 11) students and their target language focuses.

Table 2
A Writing Curriculum in a Hong Kong Secondary School
with Genre-Related Language Focuses

Level	Writing unit	Language focus
4	Picture description	The use of the present tense
	Description/recount	The use of time connectives
	Persuasion	The use of rhetorical devices
	Discussion	The use of expressions to present and contrast different viewpoints
	Article with headings	The use of sentence pattern “not only... but also...”
5	Information (report)	The use of reporting verbs and phrases
	Description/recount	The use of reported speech
	Exposition (proposal)	The use of expressions for writing a proposal
	Story	The use of relative clauses
	Review	The use of participle phrases

Progression-Focused

The third approach to selecting a language focus is to develop a curriculum plan that helps teachers to start with more treatable errors rather than less treatable errors. A “treatable error” is defined as “a linguistic structure that occurs in a rule-governed way” while an “untreatable error” refers to an error that is “idiosyncratic, and the student will need to utilize acquired knowledge of the language to self-correct it” (Ferris, 2011, p. 35). Examples of “treatable errors” include verb tenses and forms, definite and indefinite articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, and pronouns. They also include such sentence-level errors as run-ons, comma splices, fragments, and other errors for which a “student writer can be pointed to a grammar book or set of rules to resolve

the problem” (Ferris, 2011, p. 35). “Untreatable errors” are errors that pertain to word choice and sentence structures (e.g., word order problems, missing words). With this understanding, teachers can develop a progression chart of a predetermined list of language features in order to include the features that are of appropriate difficulty for students at a particular stage of learning. Table 3 is a progression chart of some of the language features covered in a secondary school in Hong Kong (Grade 7).

Table 3
A Progression Chart of Language Features

Type of error	Language feature	Description
Treatable	Subject-verb agreement	Ensure the verb form in a sentence matches with the subject.
	Verb tense	Use the present, past, and future tenses accurately by changing the verb forms.
	Comma splice	Refrain from using commas to connect unrelated sentence. Learn to use periods correctly.
Untreatable	Word choice	Choose words to convey ideas precisely.
	Compound and complex sentences	Place phrases and clauses within a sentence.

Teaching the Focus

Identifying the Focus

Rather than telling students what the language focus of a lesson is, teachers can ask them to identify recurring language features or patterns found in a sample text. For example, to help students identify the importance of using the past tense when writing a story, teachers can show students a short story and ask them to highlight and identify the verb tense used in story writing. Below is a sample story used by a secondary teacher with a group of Grade 8 students in Hong Kong.

One autumn evening, Charles and Beth went to the theater. They attended a play. The play started at 7:00. Charles and Beth enjoyed the theater.

After the play, Charles and Beth walked together in the park. They walked beside the lake. The moon was bright. They talked about their future.

When Charles and Beth went home, their children were not asleep. They waited for Charles and Beth to return. They were excited to hear about the theater.

Charles told the children about the play. Then, Beth put the children to bed. Charles and Beth were very tired. It was a good night!

Source: <http://www.really-learn-english.com/simple-past.html>

Explaining the Focus

After the students have “discovered” the target language feature(s) in a text, teachers can review or explain relevant grammar rules that govern how the feature is used deductively (Erlam, 2003) or inductively (Thornbury, 2005; Vogel, Herron, Cole, & York, 2011). For instance, referring to the above example, teachers can explain to students that past tenses (in particular, the simple past tense) are often used in storytelling because the writer is retelling a story that happened in the past. Deductive grammar instruction can be facilitated by referring students to rules and explanations in grammar books (Erlam, 2003). In some cases, however, the grammar rules may not be easily comprehensible to the students (e.g., irregular verbs); to facilitate students’ understanding of such grammar items, an inductive consciousness-raising task can be adopted (Ellis, 2002). In inductive consciousness-raising tasks, students are presented with an authentic language context (e.g., a real story with a lot of irregular verbs). Instead of the teacher explaining the target form, students are asked to identify the form and induce the “rule” by noticing the similarities shared among the examples. Below is an example of an inductive consciousness-raising task designed to help students understand how irregular verbs in the past tense are formed.

Instruction:

1. Read the following extract from a short story.

In the princess’s wedding, everyone was very happy and they were enjoying themselves very much. The guests *drank* the nice wines served in the banquet, and the famous opera singer *sang* a beautiful aria. There were children who *ran* around and *swam* in the pool.

2. Identify the verb tenses of the italicized verbs.
3. Discuss with a partner the similarities among these verbs in terms of verb form (e.g., pay attention to how these verbs are spelled).
4. Discuss with a partner how the verb form of these verbs is different from the underlined verbs below:
 - a. talk → talked
 - b. park → parked
 - c. ask → asked
5. Try to make up a rule to explain the formation of the italicized verbs in the extract.
6. Brainstorm some other verbs that follow the same rule in (5).
7. Make up one sentence that includes verbs following the rule in (5).

Practicing and Applying the Focus

After students understand the rules that govern the language focus or have enough exposure to examples of a non-rule-governed language focus, teachers can provide students with a controlled practice. The example below shows a controlled practice for students using irregular verbs. This controlled practice takes the form of a gap-filling exercise.

An Extract from a Controlled Practice

I _____ (fly) to Vancouver yesterday. My grandchildren _____ (grow) up there and I hadn't _____ (see) them in years. I hadn't _____ (write) to them or _____ (speak) on the phone with them in years. At the Vancouver airport, I _____ (put) my suitcase into a rental car and _____ (drive) to their home to surprise them.

The last teaching step concerns an application writing task. Different from a controlled practice, an application task allows students to freely express their ideas by employing the target language focus (Badger & White, 2000). Continuing with the example on p. 78, students can be asked to complete the following task.

An Application Writing Task

Write four sentences related to the princess story. Try to use the verbs given below.

Bring	Feed	Give
Keep	Lend	Pay

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Reinforcing the Focus

Self and Peer Evaluation

In order to deepen students' understanding of the target language focus and raise their awareness, teachers can guide students to conduct self and peer evaluation through highlighting their own use of the target focus in their writing. The purpose of this evaluation task is twofold: on the one hand, students can proofread to see if the target language focus is used accurately in all the examples highlighted. On the other hand, if students fail to highlight any example of the language focus, it may mean that the students did not use any of the language features and they should revise their work by adding the

target feature. In a Grade 7 class I taught, I asked students to highlight three target language focuses in one of their writing tasks, a diary entry, using different colours: the use of adjectives to describe feelings (in yellow), the use of the past tense to recount events (in green), and the use of time connectives to present events chronologically (in purple). This was done before the writing was submitted to the teacher for feedback to raise students' awareness of the target language features.

Mini Grammar Lessons

Finally, teachers can identify common errors in the use of the target language focus and prepare short exercises such as proofreading or sentence rewriting after returning the marked compositions to students.

A mini grammar lesson is different from prewriting grammar instruction because a mini grammar lesson is more student-centred. In designing a mini grammar lesson, the teacher needs to identify and narrow the target language features with which a specific group of students needs the most help. The teacher can then provide brief explanations of the target features and find good and bad examples from authentic texts (e.g., students' writing) for discovery and analysis activities (Ferris, 2011).

Conclusion

Having identified the research-practice divide in WCF and the limitations of WCF research to inform practice, this article proposes a three-stage model as a systematic pedagogical approach to implement WCF. This three-stage model (selecting the focus, teaching the focus, and reinforcing the focus) attempts to consolidate the alignment between instruction and assessment. In addition, writing teachers are offered some practical strategies to select the marking focuses (by students' needs, by genres, and by difficulties), to teach the focuses (inductive and deductive grammar instruction), and to consolidate the focuses (through self evaluation, peer evaluation, and mini grammar lesson). Through employing this model and keeping abreast of WCF research development, writing teachers can better explain their focused approach to giving feedback to the students, parents, and school. Because there is a stronger alignment between instruction and assessment, it is more likely to facilitate students' acquisition of the target language features. While research has presented some arguments in favour of focused WCF (e.g., more manageable for students), this article provides a practical solution for writing teachers to implement focused WCF in their classrooms in a systematic way. Despite focusing on teachers teaching in secondary levels, this generic model can be easily adapted by writing instructors teaching in a postsecondary context. It is suggested that university instructors can incorporate this model into the various writing stages in a process approach so they can respond to different error types in different drafts.

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