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Exploring learner engagement with written corrective feedback in a Chinese tertiary EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

While many studies have examined the impact of written corrective feedback (WCF) on L2 learners' subsequent writing, learner engagement with WCF has been under-conceptualized and under-explored: Not only has the term "learner engagement" been often used without being clearly defined, but few studies have sought to investigate this aspect. Informed by Ellis's ((2010) *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 32, 335–349) multiple-dimensional perspective on learner engagement with corrective feedback, this paper reports on a naturalistic case study involving four non-English major Chinese EFL learners which was conducted to explore how learners cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively engage with WCF. Data collected from multiple sources, including learners' written texts, interviews, retrospective verbal reports, and teacher–student writing conferences show the complexity of learner engagement within and across the cognitive, the behavioral, and the affective dimensions. Also prominent in the data are individual differences in learner engagement with WCF, which may be attributed partly to learners' beliefs and experiences about WCF and L2 writing, their L2 learning goals, and to the interactional context in which WCF was received and processed. Findings suggest that teachers need to have a thorough understanding of students' backgrounds and beliefs and that they should carefully plan their WCF strategies to enhance students' engagement with WCF.

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Introduction

Providing feedback on linguistic errors in L2 learners' writing is one of the central concerns of L2 teachers. Given the large amount of time they spend offering written corrective feedback (WCF) on L2 learners' written texts (e.g., Lee, 2008a), most teachers may be expecting students to be deeply engaged with that feedback. However, this expectation is not always fulfilled (e.g., Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Lee, 2008b). To help teachers to enhance their WCF, we need to have a more thorough understanding of learner engagement with WCF. Moreover, as learner engagement is a critical link that connects the provision of WCF with learning outcomes, research on this construct can contribute to the current theorizing about the WCF mechanism. While previous findings have offered insights into some aspects of engagement with WCF, including the depth of processing (e.g., Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010), the use of WCF in the revision process (e.g., Hyland, 2003), and

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learners' attitudes toward WCF (e.g., Lee, 2008b), there is still relatively little research taking a multi-dimensional perspective to integrate the cognitive, the behavioral, and the affective aspects of learner engagement with WCF.

This paper reports on an exploratory multiple-case study conducted against this backdrop to investigate four learners' cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with teacher WCF in a Chinese tertiary-level EFL classroom. By presenting four holistic and contextualized case narratives, we attempt to uncover the complexity of learner engagement with WCF, in the hope of providing new insights into the process through which L2 learners deal with WCF.

Background literature

A multi-dimensional perspective to learner engagement with WCF

Learner engagement plays a central role in the CF mechanism¹ by mediating teacher provision of CF and learning outcomes (Ellis, 2010). Researchers interested in the process through which learners attend to and use WCF have generated empirical findings that can throw light on learner engagement; however, *learner engagement* is open to various interpretations and encompasses numerous sub-constructs, such as the depth of processing (Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010), language analysis and cognitive comparison (Sheen, 2010), awareness of monitoring and editing (Ferris et al., 2013), learners' willingness and commitment to "reason[ing] through their errors" (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010, p. 453), revision operations (Ferris, 2006), as well as learning strategies enhancing memorization of target forms (Hyland, 2003). While all these aspects have the potential to inform researchers and teachers about learner engagement with WCF, there is still some confusion as to what actually constitutes learner engagement.

Probably the most well-articulated definition of learner engagement up to now is provided in Ellis's (2010) componential framework for CF, in which learner engagement is equated to the ways that learners respond to CF. Three perspectives for examining learner engagement were proposed: the cognitive perspective, the behavioral perspective, and the attitudinal perspective. In this framework, cognitive engagement refers to "how learners attend to the CF they receive" (p. 342), while behavioral engagement pertains to learners' uptake or revisions elicited by CF, and attitudinal engagement involves learners' affective responses to CF (e.g., anxiety) and attitudes (e.g., dislike). Ellis also pointed out that learner engagement with WCF is mediated by learner factors and contextual factors, which have been emphasized in socioculturally oriented studies of WCF. Therefore, despite its reductionist nature (p. 346), the framework is also compatible with the sociocultural perspective on CF, which argues that (a) students are active agents of their own learning rather than passive recipients of feedback (e.g., Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001), and (b) CF is situated in not only the macro-level sociocultural and sociopolitical context (Goldstein, 2006), but also in the interactive context, in which CF can serve as scaffolding that assists a learner in using target forms more independently (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994).

While Ellis's (2010) framework forms the basis of the current study, it was originally proposed for CF in general rather than for WCF in particular. It may therefore need to be adjusted to account for the complexity and particularity of learner engagement with WCF. First, while the quality of noticing (e.g., noticing vs. understanding as found in Sachs & Polio, 2007) is important for engagement with WCF, we need to be aware that learners may have fewer difficulties in recognizing the corrective force of WCF than they do with oral CF (Ellis, 2010; Sheen, 2010). Moreover, given the longer processing time available with WCF, learners may deploy some cognitive strategies, such as making a mental note (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris et al., 2013), memorization, and visualization (Sachs & Polio, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). In addition, the meta-cognitive aspect of engagement is also involved. Since WCF is usually delayed, off-line, and provided with less communicative pressure, learners can more actively regulate their engagement with WCF, such as evaluating the effectiveness of WCF and deciding whether they should spend effort in using that WCF (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010); if WCF is sustained over a period, learners may also monitor their use of problematic forms (Ferris et al., 2013). As for behavioral engagement with WCF, not only revision operations (uptake) need to be considered, but also revision and learning strategies that facilitate the processing of WCF and help students improve for their future writing, such as keeping an error book (Hyland, 2003) and consulting grammar books, dictionaries, and peers (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Third, since learners' emotional reactions to WCF may change during the revision process, the dynamics of affective engagement with WCF are also important. Taking these factors into account, a multi-dimensional framework of learner engagement with WCF as shown in Table 1 has been adapted for the current study based on Ellis's (2010) conceptualization of engagement.

Individual differences in learner engagement with WCF

The complexity of learner engagement is not only manifested in its multi-faceted nature, but is also evident in the individual differences demonstrated by learners using feedback. Previous case studies have shown that the depth of processing of WCF varies across individual learners. For example, Qi and Lapkin (2001) found that a more proficient learner and a less proficient learner differed in the way they verbalized the underlying rules accounting for problems indicated by reformulation. Investigating advanced ESL learners' processing of reformulation and coded WCF through pair talk, Storch

¹ CF here refers to broader corrective feedback, including both oral CF and written CF (WCF).

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