



Methodological synthesis of research on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in L2 writing



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ABSTRACT

Despite an abundance of research on corrective feedback (CF) in L2 writing, answers to fundamental questions of whether and to what extent various types of CF can promote accuracy remain inconclusive. Reviewers have pointed to the methodological limitations and inconsistencies in the domain; nevertheless, such arguments are largely anecdotal rather than based on systematic inquiry of primary empirical studies. Driven by the gap, this methodological synthesis reviews the state-of-the-art research on the effectiveness of CF in L2 writing. Thirty-two published studies and twelve dissertations were retrieved and coded following meta-analytic procedures. Results revealed a number of methodological limitations such as (a) inadequate reporting of research context, methodology, and statistical analyses; (b) designs of low ecological validity (e.g., “one-shot” treatment and predominantly timed in-class writing tasks); (c) mixed kinds of feedback as treatment for a single group rendering it impossible to tease apart efficacy of an individual feedback method; and (d) a wide array of outcome accuracy measures, making it difficult to compare results across studies. We compare our findings with results in general L2 study meta-analytical research and offer suggestions to guide future written CF studies in the hopes of advancing methodological and reporting practices in the domain.

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1. Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) has been and remains the most contentious issue in second language (L2) writing research. The ongoing debate over the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF), both overall and comparing various feedback types, has produced over 300 published papers including primary studies, review literature, and meta-analyses. Surprisingly, not much consensus has been reached so far even on the most fundamental issues: whether WCF is a useful practice, and if so, how it can be most effectively applied to help L2 learners improve their written accuracy.

A number of review papers have attributed this seeming stagnation to methodological challenges and inconsistencies in the existing WCF research base (e.g., Bruton, 2009, 2010; Ellis, 2008, 2010; Ferris, 2004; Guénette, 2007; Truscott, 2007; Van Beuningen, 2010). Some critiques highlight the lack of control groups, exclusive focus on edited texts rather than new pieces of writing, and incomparability due to inconsistent treatments and accuracy measures. In evaluating the advances in research design since early review papers emerged, Storch (2010) concluded that many of these methodological inconsistencies had been addressed (albeit in exchange for ecological validity), pointing to a select group of recent studies.

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While narrative (qualitative) reviews are valuable in guiding WCF research, each has relied on limited and perhaps selectively chosen samples of primary studies to paint a general picture of the key methodological issues deserving greater attention. There have also been a few meta-analytic studies on the effectiveness of WCF (e.g., Biber, Nekrasova, & Horn, 2011; Russell & Spada, 2006; Truscott, 2007). However, Truscott (2007) has been criticized because of its inclusion and exclusion criteria and small number of studies upon which the conclusions were drawn. Biber et al. (2011) is broader in scope, covering CF on both L1 and L2 writing as well as both content- and form-focused feedback. More importantly, none of these studies has taken on a systematic analysis of methodological and reporting practices in this domain.

This study is motivated by this gap and we attempt to verify past critiques and recommendations by reporting the state-of-the-art in methodological features and data reporting practices across WCF research that has investigated development in accuracy in new writings over time. Three critical features distinguish the current study from the existing narrative and meta-analytic reviews in the domain of WCF. First, unlike previous meta-analytic research which focused on overall effectiveness of written CF (e.g., Truscott, 2007), we focus on identifying patterns, both strengths and limitations, in methodological designs and sampling practices in the existing body of WCF literature. Second, whereas most previous reviews discussed only a limited number of primary studies (relying on researchers' expertise and intuition), this synthesis attempts to include a sample of studies close to the entire population of studies of interest. Third, in line with previous methodological reviews in other domains (e.g., Plonsky & Gass, 2011) and the growing synthetic tradition in L2 research more generally (e.g., Oswald & Plonsky, 2010), we have adopted a systematic and quantitative approach. Specifically, we adhere to principles and techniques of meta-analysis in data retrieval, coding, and analysis. This study is not a meta-analysis in the strict sense, however, because our interest here is exclusively on methodological and reporting practices and we do not, therefore, code for and aggregate effect sizes.

By narrowing the scope of this synthesis to studies that investigate long-term gains in accuracy, we exclude a bulk of studies that focus exclusively on draft revision (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001). We feel, of course, that revision is a necessary first step in the development of written accuracy. However, by focusing on what Ferris (2004) refers to as "the big question", we hope to guide the design of future studies in this area, thereby moving us closer to addressing the overarching concern of practitioners: whether or not WCF has a lasting impact on students' written accuracy development. The literature review below highlights the trends and challenges that have been identified in methodological practice and progress in past WCF reviews with the aim of motivating the variables we coded across this research base.

1.1. Methodological progress in WCF research

A decade ago, Ferris noted that WCF research was "virtually at Square One, as the existing research base is incomplete and inconsistent" (2004, p. 49). The contribution of error feedback to students' writing development remains unclear and a number of commentaries have echoed concerns over the lack of systematicity and replicability in WCF research. Bruton (2010) described the ongoing debate over effectiveness of grammar correction in L2 writing as "sterile" and "tedious" with inadequate methodological development, and "academic" in that it lacks relevance for most L2 writing contexts or practice (p. 491). Storch (2010) investigated progress (or lack thereof) in methodological design in this domain and concluded that many of the shortcomings have been addressed, although the efforts for greater experimental rigor have created new dilemmas in turn (i.e., a shift toward SLA-oriented studies that focus on single error types with less ecological classroom validity). This tension between methodological rigor and ecological validity has been central to the discussion in this area in recent years (Ferris, 2010), bringing necessary attention to purpose in designing WCF research.

Meanwhile, L2 research has witnessed a recent movement in systematic methodological review. Coming out of the meta-analytic tradition (Norris & Ortega, 2000, Norris & Ortega, 2006), methodological review allows for systematic description of research and reporting practices within a domain for the purpose of guiding future research efforts. Recent studies have synthesized quantitative L2 research for purposes of reflection and advancement in research practices across the field in general (Plonsky, 2013; Plonsky, 2014a) and within subdomains (e.g., interaction; Plonsky & Gass, 2011). Studies in the area have largely addressed reporting and sampling practices, major design types, and statistical analyses. Some of the findings include (a) deficiencies yet improvement in reporting practices, (b) a decrease in random assignment to experimental conditions, (c) an increase in pre- and delayed posttest conditions, and (d) reliance on means-based statistical analyses. With a better understanding of research and reporting practices, future designs can be better informed. As argued by Plonsky (2013), the progress of SLA and its subdomains such as WCF relies heavily on "sound research designs, principled data analyses, and transparent reporting practices" (p. 656). This study is motivated and based on this argument. Our study is also motivated by the findings in review papers to date in this area. The following section highlights specific concerns raised throughout the literature regarding inconsistencies and limitations in the WCF research base which have led to the foci of investigation in the present study. Specifically, the review centers on (a) general research design issues (e.g., the use of control group, pre- and posttest design, and length of treatment), (b) design decisions specific to the WCF domain (e.g., writing tasks, treatment types, and accuracy measures), and (c) reporting practices.

1.2. General research design issues

The challenges in designing tightly controlled experiments in WCF research have been highlighted in previous reviews. Often due to ethical considerations in withholding feedback to a group of students, many studies lack a control group or do

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