

Teacher Trainers' Perspectives and Practices Regarding Written Corrective Feedback in L2 Writing: A Mixed-Methods Study in a Venezuelan University

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Abstract

This study takes place at a university in Venezuela where Spanish is the first language. The participants are teacher trainers on a five-year program in a subject area called English Practice, where future English language teachers develop their language skills. Adopting an interpretive stance by examining qualitative and quantitative data gathered from two online questionnaires, this exploratory research aims to explore the practices and beliefs teacher trainers have regarding written corrective feedback (WCF) on their learners' writing in English. The findings reveal that trainers use more than one WCF strategy, favouring the use of codes and the provision of the correct form; the trainers report they aim to correct all errors encountered in their students' written productions since they think it improves learners' grammar accuracy while raising their language awareness. Data demonstrate that trainers WCF beliefs are influenced by previous experiences as language learners, institutional guidelines, views of second language teaching and learning and teacher development programs. Results show that trainers believe they should adopt a more rigorous WCF approach with pre-service teachers than with other learners due to the fact trainees are regarded as prospective language models who need to avoid errors in their future teaching practice.

Introduction

Genesis of the study

It has become axiomatic in teaching that providing error correction is a burdensome task and has been the topic of numerous professional academic discussions. As Hyland (2010, p. xv) states, written corrective feedback (WCF) has been documented as “one of the language teacher’s most important tasks” and how to provide appropriate and effective WCF in writing has been focus of many research projects in recent years. However, I feel that few practical outcomes have emerged for English language classroom teachers and that is the reason why I agree with Ferris’s (2011) advice to focus research and discussion on how to address the treatment of errors with an insight into when and why we should do so.

The way teachers respond to learner written productions is a field I have always been interested in since not only as a teacher, but also a teacher trainer, I have encountered uncertainties when providing my students with written corrective feedback. When discussing such reservations with my colleague teacher trainers, we seem to have different views concerning the potential role of error in teaching and learning, the value of written corrective feedback in students’ writing performance and what works best for learners to enhance their writing skills. In the same way, pre-service teachers seem to be confused about the different strategies their tutors use when correcting errors in their writing; they report that each tutor has a different way to correct written errors and they sense there is not a strong principle regarding the matter: what is an error to be corrected by some trainers, might not be considered as such by others.

As an English teacher and teacher educator with more than 17 years of experience in the field, I think the issue of WCF practices and beliefs becomes more crucial and complex if we take into consideration the fact that those learners we are referring to are future language teachers, who will also provide corrective feedback to their students and who may emulate their teacher trainers’ classroom practices in regards to approaching error correction.

It is well acknowledged that teachers’ beliefs greatly influence the choices they make in their classrooms; predominately their views about language, learning, teaching, errors and communication (Borg & Al Busaid, 2012, p. 6). I believe teacher trainers make assumptions about

what novice teachers should know and learn and their expected performance in the classroom, so they use those hypotheses as a basis when making decisions in their teaching practice.

Thus, my own teaching and teacher training experiences, and the discussions held with pre-service teachers and trainers, are the reasons for me to pursue research in this complex field. They have also driven me to look for deeper insights so as to reflect on what teacher trainers really do, and what is behind their choices in general and when providing written corrective feedback in L2 writing in particular.

Background

This exploratory study is a mixed-methods project undertaken at the Modern Languages Department in the Faculty of Education of a public university in Venezuela. The participants are trainers in a subject area called English Practice, where future English teachers whose first language is Spanish, pursue a five-year teacher training and education degree.

Most teacher students are between 18 to 30 years and come from different educational backgrounds; some come from private upper schools where English is taught intensively several hours a week, and some others previously studied at public institutions where English is taught as a subject but just for 90 minutes a week; that brings different language level proficiencies in the same classes as a consequence. Once students graduate, the majority is expected to hold more than one job and teach at the elementary and secondary level in both private and public educational institutions. It is important to mention that, after finishing their university studies, these pre-service teachers do not have the need to use either spoken or written English outside their workplace.

With the objective of taking the trainees from elementary (A1 CEF level) to advanced English level (C1 CEF level), on the course this subject area, which is placed in years two and three and where I have worked for the last nine years, is divided in four modules titled: English Practice I, II, III and IV. Because Longman's *New Cutting Edge* textbooks apply the principles of communicative language teaching and task-based learning, they are used in the four modules as the core of the curriculum. Sessions are completely delivered in English and their aim is enhancing students' English language proficiency; putting major emphasis on the development of listening and speaking skills. Little time is devoted to the improvement and practice of reading and writing.

18 teacher trainers, who are in charge of the four modules above denoted, meet students 12 hours a week for 18 weeks per module. Since there is not enough time for students to write in class, a portfolio task is set every semester to allow them to develop their writing skills while producing texts dealing with a topic of interest. Written feedback is provided by the trainers, thus trainees are expected to submit more than one draft taking into consideration the comments made by tutors. Although the institution recommends the use of linguistic codes to correct students' writings, such WCF practice is not mandatory or stipulated at any formal level so, it is the teacher trainers' choice to decide what WCF is best for their learners, taking into consideration their beliefs, teaching styles and other factors that affect ELT.

Research Questions

This small-scale exploratory mixed methods research does not claim to make any generalizations about the practices and perspectives regarding WCF by L2 teachers in general. Instead, I strive for a deeper understanding of the issue in the case of these teacher trainers in Venezuela. I pose the following research questions for this study:

1. *What are the current practices among teacher trainers regarding WCF of L2 writing?*

- What strategies do they use to provide WCF?
- How frequently do they provide WCF to students?
- What types of errors do they address?

2. *What are teacher trainers' beliefs on WCF?*

- What do they feel is the role of errors when teaching writing?
- What are their criteria or principles which predict their WCF practices?
- In their experience, has WCF been effective in reducing the amount of errors L2 writers make?

Discussion

Teacher trainers' WCF current practices

First, according to the findings reported, the WCF practices teacher trainers use in L2 writing follow the WCF typology established by Ellis (2009) and Ferris (2011) (see table 1) No other strategy was found in this study, but the use of not one but many strategies was indicated by these participants, when they chose more than one option in the questionnaire.

Table 1

Typology of written corrective feedback strategies

<i>Type of CF</i>	<i>Description</i>
Direct	The teacher provides the student with the correct form
Indirect Indicating + locating the error Indication only	The teacher indicates an error exists but do not provide the correction. This takes the form of underlining to show errors in students' texts This takes the form of an indication in the margin than an error has been made in a line of a text
Metalinguistic Use of error code Brief grammatical description	The teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clues as to the nature of the error. Teacher writes codes (e.g. ww: wrong word; art: article) Teacher numbers errors in the text and writes a grammatical description of each numbered error at the end of the text.
Focused and unfocused Unfocused CF Focused CF	This concerns whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the students' errors or select one or more types to correct. This distinction can be applied to each of the above options. It is extensive It is intensive

Also, the present findings that indicate that, when dealing with WCF, teacher trainers prefer coding the error and/or providing the correct form, seem to be consistent with other research which found that when providing WCF, teachers play two major roles: the initiator and the provider (Furieux, 2007). However, my findings also suggest that number + explanation along with indicate line, are the two least preferred WCF practices (see Table 2). A possible explanation for this might be the fact that all respondents have considerable experience training teachers and they all work at different levels within the same university. Besides, they might know what works

best in every specific situation. It might also be that since teacher education is involved, these teacher trainers want to model different strategies for their future language teachers to imitate later on as they did when they were trained to be teachers in the past.

Table 2 below sets out the most commonly used WCF strategies: Providing the student with the correct form, along with the use of codes are the two most used strategies for error correction in L2 writing. Indicating without supplying the right form is by far the least-used strategy with only 8% applying it.

Table 2

WCF strategies: Frequency of use

	% of teacher trainers who use this strategy
Correct form	85 %
Code error	77 %
Highlight error	38 %
Number + explanation	23 %
Indicate line	8 %

Furthermore, teachers have very positive perceptions of WCF and its potential use in English language teaching. This research identifies the use of indirect strategies (use of codes) as one of the preferred WCF practices for teacher trainers and the best when working with teacher trainees. This positive perception may be due to participants' previous experiences as language learners and their professional experience as teacher trainers which might help them recognize WCF potential uses in ELT. The preponderance of using codes to provide WCF can be due to the fact that, according to the data collected, there are certain university guidelines which have shaped the way they approach grammar correction in L2 writing.

Finally, this study revealed teacher trainers use WCF in L2 writing for promoting autonomy, raising language awareness, enhancing grammar accuracy, among others. These

findings are similar to the study of Evans (2010) whose results indicate that WCF is commonly used by experienced and well-educated teachers for diverse instructional reasons. It is likely that this is due to the fact that these trainers are well-versed in methodology and WCF strategies so as to acknowledge the importance of taking into consideration students' individual needs, language level, context, etc. Also, I think that when deciding what WCF strategy to use, trainers not only take into consideration institutional guidelines, but also time constraints and teaching style as previously discussed.

Teacher trainers' WCF beliefs

Regarding teachers' beliefs, this study produced findings that can demonstrate teacher trainers describe learners' errors as resources for learning and teaching a second language. This endorses the view of Richards (1974) where errors are seen as learning information to enhance the planning of the teaching. Richards also adds that errors can help learners in mastering the language and the findings of this research show how teacher trainers believe errors can enhance language awareness and autonomy, hence become a crucial part in the learning of an L2. As well, Brown (2000) determines that "interlanguage" is a key concept when addressing errors; participants also agree with this statement due to the fact they see errors as illustrations for teaching and as a personalised/individual picture of learners' skills and language level (p. 205). But one question arises from the findings of the present study: if errors are addressed as a resource and a natural feature of learning, why did the respondents report the need to avoid them when training teachers? Participants' responses suggest that trainers think unfocused WCF leads to accuracy, and an implication of this is the possibility of overcorrecting students' productions and its consequences in the learning process. First, the importance of fluency and communication is neglected: by focusing only in accuracy as a synonym of mastery of the language, teacher trainers might not be setting the best example to their trainees. Secondly, they are also language role models to follow. Due to a small sample size; caution must be applied, as the finding cannot be transferable to all teaching settings. This contradictory conclusion needs further research for a deeper understanding.

Ellis (2009) states that using codes (See Table 1) (metalinguistic WCF) promotes a deeper understanding and thinking for advanced students. However, this study indicated that teachers

feel the use of such strategy as the best for teacher trainees regardless of their level, since it encourages reflection and awareness. This can be seen as an indication of the influence teachers' beliefs have on the choice of the WCF strategy that best suits their students' needs and as a corroboration of Richardson's (1996), Johnson's (1994) and Hampton's (1994) view of teachers' beliefs as a way to understand their instructional decisions and teaching practices, as a major source of influence when planning a class.

In addition, this research was successful as it was able to distinguish the three sources that mainly influence teacher trainers' beliefs regarding WCF: previous language learning experiences, teacher development programs and views of language learning and teaching. However, the findings did not mention anything dealing with the participants' instructional experience and the way they modify their beliefs as indicated by Baleghizadeh (2010) and whose results suggested the importance of the role of teacher training courses in the shaping of teachers' WCF beliefs. It may be the case that respondents did not receive WCF instruction while training to become teachers. It would be interesting to assess whether teacher trainers are provided with any kind of WCF during their teacher education and if that really greatly influences their professional practice. This can usefully be the subject of further research.

Time constraints and pre-training or clear guidelines to students were found to be some of the criteria respondents take into consideration when deciding on the amount of WCF and the strategy used. Although time is an unanticipated outcome that has not previously been described and which I could not find any readings related to, one explanation to this issue is the reality Venezuelan teachers face: really low salaries and the need to hold two to three jobs at a time which leaves little time to the correction of writing. It is advisable to do further research on this. More broadly, additional examination is also needed to determine why if time is named to be a key factor when providing written corrective feedback to L2 writing, indicating where the error is but do not providing correction was the strategy they report as one of the least used. That is obviously not a time-consuming WCF strategy and it would save time to teacher trainers when correcting. The reason for this is not certain but it might have to do with the institutional guidelines provided where the use of codes for WCF is preferred.

Finally, the most striking finding to emerge from the data is that 100% of the teacher trainers who took part of this research pointed out they approach WCF in L2 writing in a stricter way than when they teach at other institutions where students are not language teacher trainees. Maybe that explains why most of them (77%) say that they correct almost all the errors encountered in their students' L2 writings. They see their teacher students as language role models who should achieve accuracy through the understanding of the feedback provided. But, do teacher trainees learn in a different way from any other person? Should accuracy be a goal when training teachers or even when teaching at any level or setting? What role do fluency and communication play? I think these trainers assume the language knowledge teachers should have is merely prescriptive grammar: syntax, morphology and semantics and not knowledge of the language as a communication tool in an interactional real-world context (Mittins, 1991, p. 22). I believe what makes a good L2 teacher goes beyond this finding: personality, adaptability to different roles in the classroom, good rapport between the teachers and the class (Harmer, 2009, p. 25), efficient management, among others are key elements that make a good teacher. These are important questions for future studies.

This study has indicated that there may be a link between teachers' practices and their beliefs. Whatever decision they make in the classroom may be connected to what they consider important and necessary for their students. This small research study does not pretend to make any generalizations but seeks for a deeper understanding of what Venezuelan teacher trainers do and their reasons for doing it, reflection, awareness, students' active and committed learning from errors and the major role teachers play in the L2 learning process, as role models, are key features that come alive when providing written corrective feedback in L2 writing to teacher trainees. The possibilities of further research in the field are enormous and a similar study in another country or setting is advisable.

The present study shows that giving written corrective feedback is complex and exhausting, but the value of providing appropriate WCF to students is crucial for their learning and development of their language skills. Understanding the English language system, planning lessons to meet different learning styles, manage mixed-abilities classrooms, promoting interaction, enhancing learners' various and individual motivations along with providing an

efficient and effective feedback seem to be a lot for a teacher, but who said it was easy? Teaching is art; it is a craft, a way of life and should be embraced and enjoyed as such.

Conclusions

To conclude, the need to offer appropriate written corrective feedback to trainees as a means of learning reflectively while analyzing errors, should also encourage trainers to incorporate reflective teaching in their professional practice. The data collected in this study should be used as basis for critical reflection about teaching, specifically about the provision of error correction in L2 writing.

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