

Effective Written Corrective Feedback on EFL Students' Academic Writing

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Submitted: 04/07/2022

Revised: 23/07/2022

Accepted: 24/09/2022

E-ISSN : 2579-4574

P-ISSN : 2549-7359

Abstract. Written corrective feedback (WCF) is believed to be one of the essential factors in the improvement of students' academic writing in English as Foreign Language (EFL) context. WCF is crucial for EFL students as they may face both language barriers and problems related to academic requirements during the process of writing. Hence, EFL students tend to have more challenges than L1 students, especially in making pieces of academic writing. This current research aims to find out the criteria of effective WCF that help EFL students on their academic writing. This current research employed qualitative approach. The current research is a descriptive qualitative research design. It employed interview as a data collection method. Interview guidelines were used as the instrument of data collection. Participants of the study are four students in an English Education Department in a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The participants experienced the process of writing a research report as the fulfillment of getting an undergraduate degree. The research found that criteria of effective WCF i.e. WCF should be understandable, focused, and direct. These findings imply that teachers should consider how to give WCF to the students. The criteria of effective WCF found in the current study could be reference and guideline by the teacher about what kind of WCF that help students better in their academic writing. By considering the WCF they give, teachers could have better writing feedback to the students.

Keywords: *Feedback, Written Corrective Feedback, Academic Writing*

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INTRODUCTION

Written feedback is essential for students' writing. [Mao & Crosthwaite \(2019\)](#) defines written feedback as the feedback written by the teachers on students' work, which subsequently improves the students' writing. It is the feedback the teachers give in responding to the students writing in written form, such as notes, symbols, and corrections. The written feedback aims to enhance the students' writing. Differently from oral feedback, written feedback is usually provided on the students writing (e.g. students' papers, writing submissions, and writing assignments).

In EFL context, written feedback is crucial as it provides students with input about correct and appropriate forms of writing production, which is not their first language. Instead of oral feedback, written feedback is more flexible and can be easily well documented in students' pieces of writing. By its advantages, the teachers often provide written feedback as a means of dialogue in written form to students about their writings. Moreover, in some practices, teachers combine written feedback with oral feedback through writing consultation.

One of the kinds of written feedback is written corrective feedback (WCF), which focuses on giving students corrections to their writing. Among types of written feedback, WCF is a particular type of feedback that is still in debate and is still not in a consensus among the experts. WCF as a repertoire of teachers in giving input to students' writing becomes a focus on studies in the area of writing in recent years. Studies on WCF seem to suggest different views on how WCF affect students' writing. Literature has reported two trends of WCF, both its negative and positive effects on students' writing. WCF was found to be less valuable and even harmful for the development of students' writing ([Truscott, 1996](#); [Gad et al., 2016](#); [Chandler, 2003](#); [Lee, 2008](#)). They are in a view that WCF does not give benefits to student writing development. They suggest avoiding the practice of giving WCF to students writing as it may have adverse effects on their language development. However, other studies have found different views on the importance of WCF for students' writing ([Ferris, 2004](#); [Truscott, 2004](#); [Bitchener, 2012](#); [Hyland & Hyland, 2006](#)). The latter studies found that, to some extent, WCF is beneficial to students writing, especially in writing accuracy.

The studies, as mentioned earlier, primarily related to the harm of WCF is likely ascribed to ineffective WCF provided by teachers. It implies that WCF should be effective in improving students' writing. Effective WCF will ensure the students get valuable feedback to improve their writing, and it is a crucial determinant for the success of students writing. In an English department of a university in Yogyakarta, English is used in academic writing by students in the form of an undergraduate thesis. During the writing process, the students are given written corrective feedback by their supervisors. The researcher interviewed some lecturers as the supervisors, and it was found that there was a phenomenon in which the written corrective feedback given by the teachers has not significantly improved the students' writing. Based on the teacher's responses in the interview, students still made the same mistakes in their further writings. It can be implied that the teachers' written feedback has not been effective in improving students' academic

writing. Hence, this current study will be of interest to find out the students' perception of the criteria of effective corrective written feedback. It is beneficial for the teacher to improve the quality of corrective written feedback given to the students. This current study aimed to determine the criteria of effective WCF in the students' experience writing academic text. It is beneficial for the teacher as input to improve their feedback toward students' writing. In addition, it also gives insights for students to know better kinds of effective written feedback that improves their writing.

Studies on WCF are commonly related to its use for general writings. Very few studies specifically discussed academic writing in the form of an undergraduate thesis. The basic differences between general writing and academic writing make studies of general writing do not always reflect the same findings in the two contexts. Hence, the current study, which focuses on WCF in academic writing, is urgent as it would uncover the criteria of effective WCF. The focus of effective WCF in EFL students' academic writing becomes the new insight toward previous study which focus on general writing of is in L1 or L2 context. It has a new perspective on how to see WCF in a different point of view. The findings are beneficial as input for especially EFL teachers and students to improve the quality of WCF, and in the end, it would improve the quality of students' academic text.

Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is a kind of feedback teachers provide for students related to the mistakes students made in their writing. WCF is usually done directly. Ellis (2008) states that direct WCF occurs when a teacher shows students an error and provides them with the correct form of the writing. Direct feedback varies from crossing out an unnecessary word, sentence, or morpheme, adding the missing content, and writing the correct form above or near the incorrect form. On the other hand, WCF can also be done indirectly. Indirect WCF is given by indicating an error without clues of an explicit correction. It is the students' responsibility to learn and correct any issues in their writing. Typical methods of indirect WCF by Ferris & Roberts (2001) are (1) to give an underline or circle to the error; (2) to record in the margin the number of mistakes on a given line; (3) to use a code to illustrate where the error has occurred, and (4) to use a code to indicate what type of error is marked. In the following, relevant literature regarding the issue of WCF and the criteria of effective WCF will be reviewed.

Pros and Cons of Written Corrective Feedback

WCF has been studied in some studies in the area of writing. As a part of written corrective feedback, error correction is found to be harmful and less useful for students' writing (Truscott, 1996). However, Bitchener (2008) examines that Truscott's claim is limited in terms of the quality of the research design. Even though it is believed to be harmful and less relevant, students still firmly ask for WCF from the teacher to improve their writing (Ferris, 2004). It implies that students find WCF useful as input to improve their writing. The different perspectives in viewing WCF in students' writing have influenced the ways teachers make use of WCF as input for students to improve their writing.

Moreover, with a similar view, Gad et al. (2016) argue that studies on WCF have not proven that it improves the students' accuracy in writing. Besides, Mao &

Crosthwaite (2019) further state that error correction is harmful as it wastes energy and time from more productive aspects of writing. Another study by Chandler (2003) and Lee (2008) also reported that students frequently do not understand written corrective feedback from teachers. They fail to remember the written feedback during the revision. The feedback given by the teachers is often challenging to understand by the students, and they cannot respond to the feedback well.

Although some studies found that WCF seems to have less potential for improving student writing, others proved that WCF is still imperative in enhancing students' writing. Several studies claimed corrective feedback is effective, especially in ESL student writing (Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 2004). WCF is viewed as an essential factor that is beneficial for students' writing. Moreover, other studies claimed its positive effects on students' accuracy in writing (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). The previously mentioned studies found that corrective feedback has improved the students' accuracy, especially in the use of proper grammar in writing. Similarly, other studies also found that WCF improves students' writing skills and language accuracy (Bitchener, 2012; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The subsequent study was done by Solfiyatuazzahro et al. (2019), which found that WTF can improve grammatical accuracy in writing for tenth-grade students through action research.

Differently from the aspect of the development of writing skills in which WCF is believed to be harmful and less valuable (Truscott, 1996), in language acquisition, experts on SLA argued that direct WCF is more beneficial as it provides transparent information about targeted features of languages effectively (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Mancho'n, 2011; van Beuningan et al., 2008; van Beuningan et al., 2012). Furthermore, WCF is still a particular and clear way to guide and help students master language and correct their mistakes in writing (Arrad et al., 2014). In essence, WCF is still regarded as an effective way that teachers can use to assist students in correcting their mistakes in writing.

Besides, teachers' WCF has been shown to improve writing accuracy in students' revised writing drafts (Bitchener, 2008), while students can gain increased knowledge of lexical and syntactic aspect through the effective provision of WCF (DeKeyser, 2007). One of the critical issues of the importance of WCF is its benefits for improving students writing accuracy. Corrections done by the students through WCF by the teacher significantly improve students' writing accuracy, especially for low proficient students.

Despite the issue of whether or not to use WCF in writing or whether WCF is beneficial or harmful, there are no clear pictures of studies to put WCF in L1 or EFL context. In reality, the context has determined how to see WCF in students writing. In the L1 context, students have been proficient in English since they were children, so the issues were more on how to write correctly without too much concern about whether the students know the words or not. However, in the EFL context, students face many difficulties, which may involve vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and text organization. So, the related studies about WCF should be placed differently whether it reflects the practice of WCF in the L1 or EFL context. It aims to get more understanding of the issue and place them in a proper context. The

finding of the study is hoped to contribute to the improvement of writing consultation of EFL teachers toward students' academic writing.

Effective Feedback

Feedback should be effective to ensure students gain advantages for their works or performances. To be effective, feedback should fulfil several criteria. There are some criteria for effective feedback by some experts. [Harthorn \(2008\)](#) proposes some criteria for effective feedback. Effective feedback should have features of manageability, meaningfulness, timeliness, and constancy. [Laurillard \(2002\)](#) suggests that to make effective feedback, the feedback should be adaptive, which is contingent on students' needs.

Meanwhile, [Hattie & Timperley \(2007\)](#) mention that to be effective, feedback must be able to assist students in setting their writing goals and maintaining progress to get the goal. The students who have already set their writing goals will be ready to prepare further actions to reach the goal. Moreover, [Nicol \(2010\)](#) proposes the criteria of effective written feedback involving the requirements of the written feedback that should be understandable, selective, specific, timely, contextualized, non-judgmental, balanced, forward-looking, and transferable. Nicol suggests teachers to use the written feedback so that it will benefit students. Knowing the criteria of effective written feedback makes them revise, upgrade, and improve the quality written feedback they give to the students.

There are numerous studies which prove that focused written feedback gives more benefits to students' writing. Written feedback which is only limited to certain types of language features, will affect better to students' writing. It is mainly because students have limited knowledge and skills to address all written feedback at once. It is also suggested to teachers to give focused written feedback when they deal with long writing. In other words, unfocused written feedback is suitable and useful if teachers deal with a short writing.

Effective Written Corrective Feedback

Regarding the kind of written corrective feedback, several studies found that focused feedback is more useful than unfocused written corrective feedback ([Bitchener & Knoch, 2009](#); [Sheen et al., 2008](#); [Sheen, 2007](#); [van Beuningen et al., 2012](#)). Students get more benefits by having written feedback, which focuses on specific error types rather than corrections of all errors in students' writing. [Ferris \(2006\)](#) delves closely into a study of WCF and found that regarding the development of writing skills, indirect WCF is more useful than direct WCF in the long term.

Other studies also figured out that explicit WCF, especially those with labels, codes, and other linguistic explanations, is more valuable than unlabeled ones ([Bitchener, 2008](#); [Bitchener & Knoch, 2008](#); [Bitchener et al., 2005](#); [Ferris, 2006](#); [Ferris & Roberts, 2001](#); [Sheen, 2007](#)). The findings may best be implemented in the EFL context, where English learning focuses more on formal grammar instruction than in the L1 context. The benefits may involve specific term as rule reminders,

codes, and corrections. The findings delineate that students get more advantages from explicit WCF than implicit ones.

RESEARCH METHOD

This present study employed a qualitative research design. It aimed to find students' perceptions of effective written corrective feedback. A descriptive qualitative design was suitable to study, exploring experiences, opinions, and perceptions (Creswell, 2002). Hence, the current study is considered suitable to employ descriptive qualitative design to delve deeply into students' perception of WCF given by teachers towards their academic text. Moreover, Merriam (1998) pointed out that through descriptive design, the researcher could gain a depiction of participants' experiences.

The participants of the study were four students of an English Education Department at a university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The four students were selected as participants of the study as they experienced the academic writing process in the form of an undergraduate thesis as the requirement to get an undergraduate degree. Four students were regarded sufficient as the number of respondents as there is no exact number of participants in a qualitative research (Creswell, 2002). Moreover, the data was saturated after the researcher interviewed four respondents. The students were in the fifth year of study and in the process of writing their undergraduate thesis. During the process of writing, a lecturer appointed as a supervisor by the department board gave written feedback, especially WCF. Through a prior interview, the researcher ensured that the four students were eligible to be the participants as they all fulfilled the overall criteria. The participants were in this current study addressed as participant one (P1), participant two (P2) and participant three (P3). The pseudonyms were used to keep the confidentiality of the participants.

The method for data collection was an interview. The current study employed in-depth interviews as it was suitable for the current study since it allows the researcher and participants to investigate real life (Cohen et al., 2011). The interview protocol was also used, comprising general interview questions related to students' experience with WCF given by the teacher. Despite the use of interview protocol, unstructured responses were employed to accommodate the participants' feelings, opinions, or situations.

In the data collection process, the researcher began by conducting prior interview with students who were likely to fulfil the criteria. Four were selected as the participants, and the researcher regarded that four students were considered sufficient to be the number of the participants. It is also considered sufficient to ensure the richness of the data. The interview was done in the Indonesian Language as L1 for the participants and researcher. The decision was based on considering that it would avoid misunderstanding and language barriers.

The data collection instrument was interview guidelines, which involved questions related to students' perception of effective WCF. The aspects to consider in developing the interview guidelines comprise the students' perception about the criteria of WCF that effectively help them improve their writing as well as the reason why it is effective. The interview guidelines were used to guide the researcher in

interviewing the participants. The researcher added further questions not limited to the listed ones if necessary. It aims to further dig out the depth of the interview as well as to maintain the interview flow.

To begin the data analysis process, the researcher transcribed the data of the interview. The next step was coding. The transcripts were coded to find the themes of the data. The next step was member checking. Member checking was used to obtain the credibility of the data to maintain trustworthiness. After member checking was done, the result indicated that all four participants agreed on the result of coding

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the data analysis of the study, several findings were found related to students' perceptions of the criteria of effective WCF. They were that WCF should be understandable, focused, and direct. Further explanation of the findings is presented below.

WCF should be understandable

The first finding related to the students' perception of the criteria of effective WCF is that WCF should be understandable. It means that WCF should be easy to understand. This criterion includes both direct and indirect WCF. Understandable WCF comprises the way the feedback is presented and the content of the feedback. To be understandable, WCF should be presented in a clear way meaning that the writing should be complete and easy to read. Since the teacher wrote the feedback to the students, they should ensure that their writing is legible and contain complete meaning. Teachers should avoid abbreviations or incomplete words, phrases, or sentences. Three students shared their perspectives on effective WCF. The findings from the data of the research are as follows.

"It is quite often that I don't understand what my teacher wrote in my writing. I know that it is the correct form from the mistake, but somehow it is illegible" (P1)

"To be effective, teachers' written feedback should be complete to be easily understood. Sometimes I get incomplete written feedback that uses abbreviations or incomplete words. It is quite difficult for me to understand" (P2)

"It really helps me have written feedback from my teacher, which is clear and easy to respond to. So I can revise my writing easily" (P3)

Three students stated that WCF should be clear and easy to be understood. It was beneficial for them to get an understandable WCF since they can easily respond to them in revising their writing.

The understandable WCF comprises the quality that WCF is easy to read; complete and does not use abbreviations or incomplete words; and clear. Those features make students easy to understand the feedback, and they can respond to the feedback by revising their writings. Nicol (2010) states that one of the requirements of effective written feedback is that it should be understandable. He

noted that the feedback should be easily responded to by students without too many difficulties in comprehending the feedback. Also, [Hattie & Timperley \(2007\)](#) state that WCF should be clear, meaning that teachers should use complete words and avoid ambiguity in the feedback. He also suggested that teachers use good handwriting in giving the students WCF. Moreover, the finding is in line with the previous study which also confirm that WCF should be understandable toward the students as found in studies by [Bitchener, 2008](#); [Bitchener & Knoch, 2008](#); [Bitchener et al., 2005](#); [Ferris, 2006](#); [Ferris & Roberts, 2001](#); and [Sheen, 2007](#).

WCF is often given by the teachers with the subjective assumption that students will understand what they write on the students' pieces writing. The findings revealed that the need to give understandable WCF is crucial for students as they experienced being given WCF, which is not clear and even sometimes confusing.

WCF can be improved by employing consultation of the students writing to the teacher. It is the practice to build communication for the students to consult the feedback they get. Students could make use of writing consultation to clarify any feedbacks that they have not understood. They could also use writing consultation to report the revision of the writing based on the feedback they get from the teachers.

WCF should be focused

Based on the students' perception, the second criterion of effective WCF is that it should be focused. It means that WCF is effective if the teachers only focus on specific aspects of the students' writing and do not cope with all the mistakes students made. It is useful for the students to be focused on particular aspects of their writing so that they have enough time to respond to the feedback effectively. Three students clarified their perspectives:

"I can work well if the teacher only gives me feedback, which focuses on a few aspects. So I can learn and revise my writing better" (P1)

"I like to have a few feedbacks on several aspects only better than many feedbacks on multiple aspects. It is because I cannot focus on many things at once" (P3)

"I can relate my grammatical mistakes with my next writing if the teacher has shown me about it. So it should only focus on few aspects" (P4)

The findings show that to be effective, WCF should be focused. Focusing on WCF means teachers should provide students with a few aspects of WCF to address. It aims to raise students' awareness about the mistakes they make in writing. Focusing only on a few types of mistakes will improve students' ability to revise the mistakes and reduce the possibility to produce the same mistakes.

The above finding is in line with several previous studies which have proven that focused WCF has many advantages in improving students' writing ([Bitchener & Knoch, 2009](#); [Sheen et al., 2008](#); [Sheen, 2007](#); [van Beuningan et al., 2012](#)). In essence, focused feedback is more useful for students than unfocused feedback as

students will have fewer aspects of mistakes to revise than the overall mistakes of their writing.

Focused WCF ensures students focus only on certain mistakes and respond to the mistakes directly. This strategy will improve students writing as they have control for not making similar mistakes for the further writing production. Writing is both mental and physical, so focusing on a few aspects of errors will help students maintain the flow of the mental process. More specifically, studies prove that, for low proficient students, focused WCF considerably helps them improve their writing since they have low competence in processing overall feedback in a single action (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Sheen, 2007; van Beuningen et al., 2012).

WCF should be direct

This current study found that the third criterion of effective WCF is that it should be direct. Students feel that direct WCF significantly improves their writing. They prefer to get a direct correction from the teachers. They thought indirect WCF did not always provide clear information about the mistakes and revise them. Four students stated the issue through the following data:

"I prefer to have a direct revision of my writing by the teacher because it can help me revise my writing easily. Direct revision really helps me improve my writing" (P1).

"Sometimes, my teachers give me indirect feedbacks so that I need to find the correct form myself. But to be honest, I like to get direct revision from my teachers. I can directly know the correct form from mistakes I made" (P2).

"I don't like to get feedback, which I need to find what it means. Sometimes I can figure out what the teacher means, but quite often I failed to understand the feedback. Giving me the correct form will be much better." (P3).

"Teachers just need to give me the correct form and give labels for similar mistakes so that I can relate my next similar mistakes to the previous revision. It is the easiest way to revise my mistakes" (P4).

Four participants preferred to have direct WCF in their writing. In this research context, direct WCF is believed to be effective by the students as it helps them find the correct form of the language. Direct WCF is suitable, especially for low-proficient students, as it provides them with the proper form of the language (Bitchener, 2008). However, a study by Ferris (2006) found that regarding the development of writing skills, indirect WCF is more valuable than direct WCF in the long term. This study is rather the opposite from the current study. However, he emphasized that indirect WCF is more suitable for long term writing development, while the current study is more on short-term writing development where instant correction is more valuable.

Before the conclusion, I must acknowledge the limitation of the current study. The limitation of the present study is due to deficiency in the fact that WCF is limited to corrective written feedback provided by teachers who also performed as

a supervisor in the process of writing academic text in the form of so-called *skripsi* (mini-thesis) done by students as fulfilment for their undergraduate degree. Any findings in the current study do not delineate the common practice of WCF in a typical writing class context.

Direct WCF is suitably applied for students who have low language proficiency. It means that the teachers should consider first what level the students' proficiencies are. It is essential since direct WCF has low or no effect on advanced language learners. Giving corrections to students' writing will not be helpful if the students have high language proficiency. The study by [Bitchener et al. \(2005\)](#) found out that the group that received direct error correction combined with oral meta-linguistic explanation outperformed groups that received indirect error correction in some grammatical features. They highlighted that adding oral meta-linguistic explanation might help facilitate writing accuracy. It can be inferred that direct error correction will be maximally applied if the practice is combined with oral meta-linguistic explanation (usually conducted through consultation) by the teachers. Students will get both written and oral input about their writing, and the two feedback are constructive and complete each other.

CONCLUSION

WCF is in a long debate among experts for its contribution to students writing skills. Despite whether or not to give WCF, it seems that, in EFL context, the questions that are mainly arisen is how to provide WCF to improve students' writing maximally. In other word, it is about how to provide WCF effectively. It will then ensure students gain benefits from it.

To sum up, there are three criteria of effective WCF perceived by students in this current study. First, WCF should be understandable. To guarantee this quality, WCF should be provided simply and clearly so that it is easy for students to read and respond to the feedback. Second, WCF should be focused. It reaffirms that WCF will be effective if teachers give feedback on a few aspects of the language instead of showing overall mistakes they found in students writing. Third, WCF should be direct. To get direct WCF is still regarded as useful by the students. Direct WCF provides the correct form of the language without any effort done by students to find the correct forms by themselves. The overall findings gain insights that in students' perspective, WCF still benefits their academic writing as long as teachers give effective WCF which fulfils the previously mentioned criteria. The three criteria found in the current study contribute to the improvement of WCF practice by the teachers in providing better input for students' writing especially in EFL context. Since the context of the research is an EFL, the findings contribute to new insights on how WCF is given. EFL students still prefer having WCF to be easy to understand, not too broad, and contain direct revision from the teacher. This becomes a guideline for teachers on how to give WCF to the students.

The findings of this current study have several implications primarily related to writing instruction. First, teachers should consider the kinds of WCF they provide to the students and the language they use to give feedback on students' writing. In providing WCF, the teacher should ensure that WCF can be understood by students easily and does not contain anything (e.g. symbols, incomplete words, notes) which

results in students' confusion. In a broader context, the teacher should provide students with the opportunity to have a consultation with the teachers to clarify and report the revision. Building good communication through intensive and scheduled consultation will enable both parties to communicate the WCF in a more comprehensive way. It will also reduce the possibility of students misunderstanding and misinterpreting the WCF.

Second, teachers should know the student's English proficiency level to adjust how they give WCF and what WCF is suitable for students with their current English proficiency level. Different students' English proficiencies will likely determine the most appropriate WCF to present. By adjusting WCF based on students' current English, teachers ensure that WCF is effectively addressed, and it would give more benefits to the improvement of students' writing.

Third, focused WCF that is suggested to be provided to the students could probably be improved. Teachers can add more language features in WCF as soon as they consider that the student's English proficiency has improved.

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