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The Effects of Written Corrective Feedback on Moroccan Undergraduate EFL Learners' Output

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Abstract:

The present piece of research is an attempt to examine the effects of written feedback on EFL learners' writing skills. It aims to demonstrate whether WCF has any role in learner's uptake of the target form and grammatical accuracy development. Essentially, it puts forward the critical role of written feedback in triggering students' attention and processing of the correct form. It also aims to show whether feedback on students' writing helps them gain the ability to come up with a more accurate production and to see whether the strategies used by the teacher lead to different degrees of noticing and processing. In order to approach these objectives, the present study adopted an exploratory design. It combined two salient research paradigms, namely the quantitative and the qualitative ones. The study also opted for triangulation so as to approach reliability and validity which are essential characteristics of a good research study. The research questions and objectives were addressed in a questionnaire administered to a total of 111 participants, in addition to a focus group and analysis of a sample of EFL learners' portfolios. The data gathered were analysed and reported on both quantitatively and qualitatively. Accordingly, the results showed that a good majority of EFL learners at M5 University prefer receiving feedback on their mistakes. It also showed that teachers tend to use different error correction strategies to react to different sorts of mistakes. Moreover, many students are aware of the effects WCF may have on their written production. Still, the amount of feedback they receive is not as important as its quality. It was demonstrated that WCF may also have some light side effects, yet the advantages of the latter outnumber the potential negative effects it might have. These results can be reconsidered in further research from the point of view of teachers.

Keywords: Language learning, corrective feedback, accuracy, EFL learners, written feedback

1. Introduction

Error correction or corrective feedback, as pedagogical practice, has been recognized as part and parcel of EFL learning and teaching. It is in fact a prevalent and controversial academic issue which embodies a basic principle in language teaching and learning as far as the role its presence plays in effective language learning is concerned. It has been the focus of many studies in the last few decades and it may continue to gain considerable attention by researchers and linguists henceforth. Corrective feedback, therefore, may be the factor that determines learners' subsequent language development or lack thereof. In essence, corrective feedback is perceived in the present work in terms of the effects it has as a practice that helps EFL learners notice the gaps and errors they tend to commit during the process of learning.

Throughout their acquisition of the target language, learners commit several errors, these errors are a natural and an inevitable part of the process of acquisition; they rather provide evidence that acquisition is actually taking place (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994). Teachers' feedback following students' errors has also been part and parcel of the teaching process. However, a number of factors interfere and affect the effectiveness of feedback on the one hand, and learners' acquisition of the correct target form on the other. In the light of this issue, this study tries to look at the role of written feedback in students' acquisition of the corrected form and its effects on students' written production in the long run.

1.1. Rationale

The present study has two main motives. First, it has been inspired from the personal experience of the researcher. The latter, who had barely received any written CF from his former teachers of composition, has been unaware of his own errors for a long time. As a result, discarding errors in writing was very effortful, timeless, and most of them were likely to fossilize. Perhaps this wouldn't have been the case if he had received feedback on these errors. Second, from a theoretical point of view, there is a scarcity of research on written corrective feedback if compared to oral feedback, even though accuracy in writing may be the most problematic concern for EFL learners. Furthermore, it is believed that some linguistic deficiencies may hinder learners' accuracy development as far as their awareness of the committed errors is concerned. In the absence, or the insufficiency, of corrective feedback, learners' errors in writing are more likely to go unnoticed or even fossilized. Therefore, the effects of written corrective feedback on EFL learners' output are worthy to be investigated in this regard.

Although Writing has been recognized as a basic component of language learning, still, written corrective feedback has received very little attention on the part of researchers. Therefore, through investigating the effectiveness of written corrective feedback and its effects on EFL learners, this study will hopefully contribute to the previous research on

error correction/CF in the realm of language teaching/learning in the Moroccan context, for a better writing style and an enjoyable learning experience for Moroccan EFL learners.

1.2. Study Objectives and Research Questions

This study attempts to investigate the role of written feedback in triggering students' attention and processing of the correct form. It aims to 1) show whether feedback on students' writing enhances their awareness, and therefore leads to a more accurate production and 2) to see whether the amount of feedback has any bearings on students' uptake/learning or lack thereof.

As such, the following set of questions constitutes the underlying backbone of the present study, based on which the researcher determines data collection and analysis methods.

- Does written corrective feedback enhance Moroccan University EFL students' awareness of their errors in writing?
- How does written corrective feedback help Moroccan University EFL students develop accuracy in writing?
- Does the amount of written corrective feedback determine Moroccan University EFL students' uptake or lack thereof?

1.3. Review of Literature

1.3.1. Corrective Feedback: An Overview

Corrective feedback -or error correction- is a thorny issue which was rigorously the subject of an on-going debate in a number of research studies (e.g., Long 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ellis 2001; Sheen 2008). A detailed and comprehensible view on corrective feedback is provided by Lightbown and Spada (2006) as:

"Any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect. This includes various responses that the learner receives. When a language learner says 'he go to school every day', corrective feedback can be explicit: 'no! We say goes not go', or implicit 'yes! He goes to school every day' and may or may not include any metalinguistic information, for instance 'do not forget to make the verb agree with the subject'" (pp. 171-172).

The issue was approached in different ways with focus on various aspects of feedback including the role of the latter in learners' uptake, accuracy and fluency. However, less attention was given to the written corrective feedback, and its effects on learners' processing of the target language. Although Long (1996) and Schmidt (1994, 2001) have set the pillars on which a more cognitive view of feedback can be built, research on the issue remains scarce. Furthermore, feedback on writing has received little attention as opposed to oral feedback which was the focus of numerous studies (Ayoun, 2001; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Lyster & Ballinger, 2011).

1.3.2. Approaches to Corrective Feedback

Throughout its history, corrective feedback was approached in various ways; the practice was viewed from the lens of many research and theoretical trends in the realm of language education. Part of the ongoing debate on the role of feedback is the claim that learners' errors are natural by-products of language learning which provide evidence that learning is actually taking place as it was stated in S.P Corder's seminal work (1967) concerning the significance of learners' errors during the process of language learning. Inspired by the latter, some studies have approached error correction from its merits, as a pedagogical practice, via emphasizing that focus on form by means of corrective feedback is an effective tool for learners' awareness raising, and that drawing attention to their errors often results in an accurate output (Swain, 1985, 1995; Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Ellis, 2001; Schmidt, 2001; Sheen, 2008; Lyster and Ballinger, 2011). On the other hand, other schools of thought, like Behaviorism, have intolerantly considered errors committed by language learners as a prohibited, intolerable outcome and impairment which should be immediately dealt with by the teachers (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2007). Similarly, others claimed the insignificance of error correction as a mere burden that is harmful to language learners, and hence it should be abandoned (Krashen, 1981a).

1.4. Corrective Feedback as a Focus-on-Form Intervention

The rationale behind claiming the effectiveness of error correction in L2 instruction is based on sundry theoretical grounds. In the early 1990s, thanks to the emergence of form-focused instruction, corrective feedback has received a considerable amount of attention from the part of both theorists and pedagogues (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Spada, 2011). These have defined Focus on Form as a methodological principle in language teaching which is achieved through a variety of ways; one pedagogical Focus on Form intervention, which has received considerable attention in SLA research, is corrective feedback. It has often been considered as an essential element of Focus on Form as it works as a noticing facilitator, attention drawing device to form and an awareness raising tool to the gaps between learners' utterances and target-like forms. Long (1996) argues that corrective feedback during classroom activities is a Focus on Form technique, often used through intervention to reject an output in a task for being inadequate, thereby alerting the students to the existence and nature of an error. Similarly, Ellis (2006) puts forward that one of the pedagogical tools identified as a Focus on Form instrument is error correction.

As elucidated in the previous paragraph, focus on linguistic form has been widely recognized as part and parcel of effective L2 pedagogy. According to Doughty (2003), it is a beneficial way to develop learners' accuracy without which second language learning would be such a challenging, timely and less successful process.

1.4.1. Corrective Feedback within Focus on Meaning

With the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1980s, there was a major shift in language teaching to an exclusive focus on communication and meaning. With meaning being the central objective, teachers are no longer focus on in the treatment of grammatical errors as much as they focus on the errors which affect the overall meaning of the utterance. Errors in CLT have been regarded as a natural phenomenon in the process of language acquisition. They are seen as part of the language acquisition process and they were expected to work themselves out eventually (Lightbown, 2003). As such, practicing too much error correction in meaning-focused activities is thus considered a way of discouraging students from speaking the language.

Corrective feedback, being a focus on form technique, was therefore assigned no role in the communicative enterprise; it has been relegated to grammar instruction and denied any function in an instruction that is mainly communication and meaning focused. The teaching of language forms, which inevitably includes error correction, was not only deemed unhelpful, but potentially detrimental. A number of theorists have objected to the use of error correction in communicative classrooms. Krashen (1992), being one of the opponents of corrective feedback, argues that the effect of Form-Focused Instruction is “peripheral and fragile” (p.409). For him, it is still not clear whether or not corrective feedback can bring about substantial changes in learners’ interlanguage systems in the long term. Other researchers argue that one main problem with the provision of feedback during communicative tasks is its ambiguity, which then renders the practice unhelpful.

1.4.2. The Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback: A Controversy in SLA Literature

Research on the effectiveness of CF reveals that the issue has a long and contentious history. There are multiple perspectives on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in the literature. The most well-known debate is that of positive and negative evidence by Gass (2006) who claims that language learners are generally exposed to two types of input: positive evidence (information as to what is acceptable) and negative evidence (information as to what is incorrect).

The distinction made between the two types of input gave rise to the question of whether positive evidence is sufficient or there is a need for negative evidence in L2 learning. While some researchers like (Krashen, 1981; Truscott, 2007) argued that, similar to (L1) acquisition, SLA requires positive evidence only, and that negative evidence is not necessary and might even be harmful; instead, they argue that maximizing learners’ exposure to comprehensible input is sufficient.

The usefulness of corrective feedback was justified from different perspectives. The interactionists (Gass, 2006; Long, 2006) acknowledge the importance of positive evidence, but in the meantime maintain that negative evidence helps the learner notice the gap between his/her nontarget-like L2 production and the target form and make subsequent modifications. On the other hand, Schmidt (1994, 2001) claims that unlike L1 acquisition, SLA is conscious. One way to enhance the learner’s noticing of linguistic forms is through the provision of corrective feedback. In addition, the effects of feedback might also be attributable to uptake, which refers to the learner’s responses to corrective feedback provided after a linguistic error or a query about a linguistic form (Sheen, 2008).

1.4.3. The Place of Written Corrective Feedback in SLA Literature

Written corrective feedback has gained considerable attention in SLA studies. Attempts to investigate the issue have been made in the early years of SLA research as a number of studies of written CF had investigated pedagogically driven questions such as those framed by Hendrickson (1978) which concern 1) reasons for correcting errors, 2) which errors should be corrected 3) when and how they should be corrected, and 4) who should do the correcting (Hendrickson, 1978). Compared with the foci of other research studies in more recent years, the early studies did not look at the more crucial underlying questions about whether or not, and the extent to which, written CF has the potential to help learners acquire the target language. However, empirical questions were being asked about the treatment of written errors and the role and effect of written feedback on second language restructuring. In this regard, a number of theoretical accounts, and models of second language development drew upon the issue.

Most of these accounts fall within the behaviorist and cognitivist perspectives. One of these accounts is Krashen’s and McLaughlin’s Models which discussed the question of whether instruction and written feedback play any role in converting declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. McLaughlin (1987) posits that it is appropriate to view second language learning as a complex cognitive process that involves internal representations that regulate and guide performance (McLaughlin, 1987). This view corroborates the idea that learning by means of explicit instruction and CF, can play an important role in this phase, and ultimately leads to automatized processing as opposed to Krashen’s (1981) claim that CF has no facilitative role in automatized knowledge. Although these perspectives made a contribution to our understanding of the role of errors in SLA, they failed to satisfactorily explain why learners continued to make errors despite various types of interventions including written corrective feedback (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012).

By and large, it would seem reasonable to conclude that written CF needs to be directed at grammatical features that learners are ready to acquire (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Other theorists and researchers (e.g., DeKeyser, 1997, 2001, 2007; Hulstijn, 1995; Schmidt, 2001, 1994; Swain, 1985) support the view that corrective feedback, can facilitate the conversion of declarative knowledge into automatized procedural knowledge.

1.4.4. The Effectiveness of Written Corrective Feedback on L2 Writing

Whether CF on students’ written errors is effective or not is an on-going debate in SLA. Research studies that investigated the efficacy of written CF have tended to look at the issue from two different perspectives. While some studies have investigated the effectiveness of written CF in terms of its ability to help learners accurately revise drafts with

written CF on their errors, others, by comparison, examined the practice of WCF in more SLA terms and were interested to see the long-term effect of written CF when learners wrote new texts (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012).

Views on the effectiveness of CF range from theorists and researchers who argue that although feedback helps learners restructure an erroneous sentence, the effect of the latter is momentous and short term and have no role to play in language development in the long run (Krashen, 1981). Other researchers call for abandonment of WCF, and present a number of arguments against the practice. Perhaps the most well-known opponent of WCF is Truscott's (1996, 1999) works wherein his first argument against WCF was that providing learners with error correction is done with the wrong belief that a simple transfer of information would enable learners to correct their grammatical errors and hopefully not repeat them in future pieces of writing. This view according to him, failed to acknowledge the complex learning processes underpinning the development of a learner's interlanguage. Another argument that Truscott presented against the practice concerns the feasibility of providing written CF at a time when the learner is "ready" to acquire a particular form or structure. Moreover, he argues that learning that results from the practice is likely to be only "superficial learning" or "pseudo learning" (op.cit p. 345), as it fails to be acquired and automatized over time.

Other studies attempted to test the effects of direct and indirect feedback on writing (Chandler, 2003; Frantzen, 1995) but have not been able to produce consistent findings. Other studies like Bitchener and Knoch (2008; 2010) have compared the effectiveness of different types of feedback within these two categories and found that direct feedback with meta-linguistic explanation tends to have a more consistently positive effect than other types of direct feedback.

2. Methodology

In order to approach the multifarious horizons of the topic at hand, the researcher draws a clear blueprint through which the outlined objectives can be met. First, the research design adopted for the present study blends qualitative and quantitative approaches. The process of data gathering was fulfilled with reliance on three instruments, namely questionnaires, focus group and an analysis of a sample of students' portfolios. As it targets early stages of language learning, the population that has made up the sample of this study consisted of first year university students. The questionnaire was administered to a total of 111 respondents. From the same population, ten students have volunteered to participate in the focus group where they were asked various questions about their perception of WCF based on their personal experience. Random samples of students' portfolios were collected and analyzed according to certain criteria, e.g., the frequent types of errors, types of feedback and the amount needed for uptake to take place. The study used different but complementary research methods to get varied data: the focus group supports the questionnaire, whereas the latter completes the portfolios. The results obtained from these tools were processed in turn both qualitatively, presented in a report format, and quantitatively using the well-known statistical software SPSS; and conclusions were drawn accordingly.

2.1. Participants

The participants that make the population sample of the present study are students from the English department at the FLHSR. The study will be of particular concern with S2 students from the English department. The rationale behind this choice accounts for the fact that students, at this particular level, are still at a relatively early stage of learning in which certain types of errors are still common in their writings. Furthermore, S2 students take courses in Composition of English as a foreign language (EFL) on a weekly basis. In such a formal linguistic environment, composition courses provide learners with extensive exposure to accurate input. Hence, these circumstances will ensure the desired type of data suitable to the purposes of the topic of the study at hand.

2.2. Data Collection Methods

As far as data collection is concerned, the researcher will opt for varied methods that go hand in hand with the research questions, design and objectives. The research questions stated above as well as the objectives set for this study call for the use of different and complementary research methods in order to collect varied data that would provide possible answers to the aforementioned questions. Hence, the study will opt for triangulation as it will hopefully be conducted with diversified, yet appropriate, research tools so as to reach the highest possible degree of validity and generalizability, and to preserve the ethical aspect of research as well. The instruments that will be used are presented below in detail.

2.3. The Questionnaire

The main objective of this research study is to end up with reliable and valid data that would help the researcher draw conclusions as to the effects of WCF on EFL learners' accuracy in writing. To this end, the researcher opts for the questionnaire as a data collection tool which will enable the researcher to measure the issue both qualitatively and quantitatively. It includes varied types of questions which may provide the researcher with an idea as to the degree to which WCF is effective. It also provides a qualitative account of the difficulties that learners encounter while learning a foreign language through open ended questions. For ethical purposes, the questionnaire includes an introductory section, informing the respondents about the purpose of the study.

The questionnaire used in the present study consists of three main parts. The first part is concerned only with general background information relevant to the research, namely, the respondents' academic level, while other variables like age and gender are not relevant to the study. This part is meant to help the researcher select and consider only the questionnaires that are filled by S2 students among other levels. Second, the questionnaire devotes a part to identifying

the place of WCF in classroom instruction. With a total number of six items, this part attempts to examine the role of WCF in developing the respondents' accuracy as EFL learners. It also attempts to shed light on the variety of strategies that are used by teachers, together with their acceptability among learners; it entails a tendency to determine the WCF strategy EFL learners prefer the most (e.g., question d, e, f and g).

The second part, on the other hand, is more concerned with respondents' attitudes towards the provision of WCF. All items in this part are basically meant to identify the degree to which EFL learners believe in the latter's effects on language development in general, and their accuracy in writing in particular. The questionnaire items in both parts are, to a great extent, complementary. They were generated and designed in tandem with the objectives and questions of the present piece of research.

2.4. Focus Group

To reduce the rate of bias yielded from questionnaires, the researcher also opts for conducting a focus group. The latter is a qualitative data collection procedure, which usually refers to a planned group discussion of twelve people at most, and six at least (Cohen et al, 2005). Less than six participants may result in a relatively limited range of ideas, and more than twelve may not be easily manageable (ibid). It is often used to gain close, intimate data directly from the context. In the present study, the researcher opts for ten participants to avoid risking the representative nature of the population sample.

The questions which are opted for in the focus group are, to some extent, similar to those in the questionnaire besides some less structured open-ended questions. Through intensive involvement, a focus group enables the researcher to obtain a face-to-face interaction with the population. Evidently, direct interaction with participants may potentially generate richer data than the questionnaires. It may also provide the researcher with representation of diversified insights, perspectives and thoughts about the targeted issue directly from the population concerned. Therefore, conducting a well-organized focus group concedes the researcher to attain ample spontaneous data, and hence the sample can be representative.

2.5. Portfolios

The present study opts for collecting, classifying and analysing learners' portfolios of their written production over a whole semester. This method enables the researcher to measure the participants' accuracy along with their written production. This way, he will also be able to observe and compare the obtained cases from different levels, to see whether WCF is effective in the first place, which error correction strategy is more effective, and whether uncorrected errors may fossilize in accordance with the objectives of the present piece of research. This method will yield both quantitative and qualitative data. Thus, it can be considered as a practical way to investigate the effects of WCF on learners' accuracy.

2.6. Data Collection Procedures

The process of data collection has undergone different procedures. As has been noted earlier, the study was carried out at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Rabat. Having decided on the class in which the process of data collection is going to take place, the researcher has asked the teacher for a chance to obtain the required data from the students. So, at the beginning of the session, the host teacher has paved the way for the researcher to collect the desired data. First, the researcher has explained the aim of the study for the students. About one hundred and eleven questionnaires were distributed. Students were asked to fill the questionnaires based on their experience with WCF in composition classes. Being done with the questionnaires, the researcher has randomly collected portfolios from twenty students. Then, he has arranged a meeting with ten volunteers to participate in the focus group. Fortunately, the tables were numbered, and arranged on a half-rounded shape. This has promoted more effective interaction between the researcher and the participants. The latter were asked indirect open-ended questions about the subject matter. They were asked about their writing style and accuracy development and their attitudes towards teachers' feedback throughout their experience with writing. The students have actively showed interest in the heated discussion they were having about the topic, and have effectively interacted with the researcher.

2.7. Design of the Study

The piece of research at hand has set itself two main objectives embraced in three general questions. As it attempts to account for the effects of WCF on EFL learners' accuracy with no experimental basis, the present study is of an exploratory nature. To explain a linguistic issue such as accuracy development, it is mandatory to do so in tandem with learners' performance. In this regard, perhaps the most reliable way to measure learners' performance, be it spoken or written, is by examining their production with ample focus on the targeted aspect.

The present study will opt for triangulation, and will make use of both qualitative and quantitative paradigms in terms of the variety of data collection methods, data analysis techniques, as well as sets of data obtained. It undertakes an inductive bottom-up design as it proceeds from specific research questions and seeks to reach generalizable conclusions. The data obtained through the portfolios and the focus group will be presented, discussed, analysed and reported on qualitatively; whereas the questionnaire will be dealt with quantitatively. The data elicited through these tools will be analysed using SPSS software (the Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The latter will translate the data into rigorous numerical and manageable units. This being the case, the conclusions will, hopefully, eventually be of a substantial degree of validity and reliability.

2.8. Data Analysis: Descriptive Statistics

Given the variety of data obtained, the analysis will be of both qualitative and quantitative nature. The results will be described, analysed and supported by descriptive statistics.

2.9. Questionnaires

The data from the questionnaires has been coded and analysed quantitatively using SPSS. Due to the varied types of items included in the questionnaires- namely: Likert scales, open ended, yes/no and multiple-choice questions- the data yielded serves as a complementation of the focus group and portfolios. As the questionnaire was organized around two different themes, represented in two separate sections, the data obtained is subsequently subject to a thematic classification.

The first section was concerned with the place of WCF in classroom instruction. This section encompasses seven question items. The first two of which were meant to see whether Moroccan EFL teachers provide WCF when needed or not. The table below presents the results of the analysis of this item:

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	96	86.5	86.5	86.5
	No	15	13.5	13.5	100.0
	Total	111	100.0	100.0	

Table 1: Do Teachers Provide a Precise WCF?

As demonstrated in the table above, 86.5% of the respondents have provided a positive answer while only 13.5% have provided a negative one.

In support to the previous results, question (d) was meant to elicit data from the respondents on the frequency of feedback provided through asking them to measure within a "Likert scale" how often their teachers provided WCF. The answers are represented in the following table:

		Freq	Prc %	C. Prc
Valid	Always	30	27.0	27.0
	Often	30	27.0	54.1
	Sometimes	31	27.9	82.0
	Rarely	5	4.5	95.5
	Never	15	13.5	100.0
	Total	111	100.0	

Table 2: How Often Do Teachers Provide WCF?

The results shown in the table support the former ones. 86.5% confirmed that their teachers provide WCF on a regular basis with different frequency rates ranging from 27% (always) to 4.5% (rarely), while only 13.5% said that they never get feedback from their teachers.

The questions concerning WCF strategies that are mostly used by the respondents' teachers were answered accordingly. The respondents were provided with multiple choices including: EF= Explicit feedback, IF= Implicit feedback, ML= Metalinguistic feedback. The table below presents the frequency of feedback yielded through the analysis of this item.

		Freq	Prc %	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	EF	51	45.9	45.9	45.9
	IF	50	45.0	45.0	91.0
	ML	10	9.0	9.0	100.0
	Total	111	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Strategies Used to Correct Errors

The results displayed in the table show that teachers resort to both explicit and implicit feedback strategies to correct students' errors. 45.9% of these uses explicit feedback and 45% use implicit feedback strategies almost equally when dealing with their students' written production. Contrastively, only 9% of teachers provide metalinguistic feedback, in the form of additional comments and explanation as to the correct form.

However, answers to question (g)- in relation to (a) in the second section- show that 63.1% of the respondents were in favour of the usefulness of WCF with significant emphasis on metalinguistic feedback. The table below shows that 31.5% prefer comments and clarifications on the correctness of the given form. As the question is an open ended one, it calls for justification of the chosen item. The answers were miscellaneous, yet, the most frequent justification suggests that this type of feedback helps students develop a metalinguistic knowledge on the correctness of the target form.

		Freq	Prc %	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Indicating	25	22.5	22.5	22.5
	Correcting	26	23.4	23.4	45.9
	Code	25	22.5	22.5	68.5
	Comment	35	31.5	31.5	100.0
	Total	111	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Effective Strategies According to Students

On the other hand, question (b) of the second section asks the respondents to identify the type of errors which they think are worthy to correct.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Grammar	30	27.0	27.0	27.0
	Meaning	40	36.0	36.0	63.1
	Both	41	36.9	36.9	100.0
	Total	111	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Types of Errors to Be Corrected

According to this table, 36% of students think that both grammatical errors and those that affect meaning should be corrected. Most of the justifications provided with regards to this statement relate to the interdependence of grammatical errors and those concerned with meaning and appropriateness. Another 36.9% are in support of meaning alone, whereas only 27% consider grammatical errors as more important.

To see whether WCF has any bearing on students' accuracy, the respondents were asked whether their performance in writing has improved and whether their production has become more accurate thanks to the frequent feedback they received. Responses to this question were varied, as illustrated in the table below.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	66	59.5	59.5	59.5
	No	45	40.5	40.5	100.0
	Total	111	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Does WCF Develop Accuracy?

As displayed in the table, most of the answers were in favour of the usefulness of WCF in helping students develop accuracy in writing. About 59.5% has answered "Yes" while 40.5% has answered "No".

In the last item of the questionnaire, a set of statements that concern some possible effects of WCF were presented, to which respondents were asked to react. These statements are supported with a Likert scale to represent the degree to which respondents agree or disagree with each statement.

- Every single error should be indicated and explicitly corrected.
- Errors should be neglected so as to encourage writing without anxiety.
- WCF can be harmful and often embarrassing to students.
- WCF has an effect on students' accuracy in the long run.
- WCF optimizes students' awareness of their errors in writing.

The results are illustrated in the following table:

SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, TD= Tend to Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree

	1		2		3		4		5	
	Freq	prc %	Freq	prc %	Freq	prc %	Freq	prc %	Freq	prc %
SA	66	59.5	36	32.5	10	9	18	16.2	20	18
A	25	22.5	40	36	43	38.5	45	40.5	71	64
Valid TD	15	13.5	25	22.5	23	21	29	26.1	15	13.5
SD	5	4.5	10	9	35	31.5	19	17.1	5	4.5
Total	111	100	111	100	111	100	111	100	111	100

Table 7: The Frequencies and Percentages Concerning the Five Statements

Figure 1

The table above represents the frequencies and percentages related to five statements in the last questionnaire item. For the first Statement, the chart indicates that 59.5% against 4.5% of the respondents strongly agree that teachers should explicitly indicate every error they come across. This also goes against the second statement in which 36% of the respondents agreed that errors should be neglected so as to encourage writing without anxiety. The third statement, which proposes potential negative effects of feedback, was significantly supported by 38.5% of the respondents. On the other hand, more than 40% agreed with the fourth statement which states that the effects of WCF last in the long run. The last statement which hypothesized that WCF promotes noticing of errors received a significant percentage of 61%.

2.10. Focus Group

To avoid any rate of bias from questionnaires, the data was supported with more direct, naturally occurring and controlled data from the focus group. The questions were of a particular concern with the provision of WCF on language learners' errors.

Before delving into a presentation and description of the data obtained through the focus group, it is worthwhile to reiterate some methodological information related to this instrument. The researcher has opted for ten EFL students to voluntarily participate in the focus group. The researcher used the questionnaires to determine what type of questions needed more discussion and data elicitation. The researcher has deliberately opted for debatable questions which would allow him to take notes of students' remarks. A detailed account of the data obtained is elaborated in the paragraph that follows.

First, all of the participants confirmed that their teachers provide feedback on their production. The majority of them think that teachers should explicitly correct learners' writings, arguing that this is assumed to be the best way to make students aware of their production. Only two participants disagreed with this argument. In turn, they argued that correcting learners' errors may be hurtful. However, all of the respondents agreed that WCF helps students improve their writings, although two of the participants seemed to hesitate, which is shown in their answer "*it is effective but...*"

Concerning the question of whether WCF prevents fossilization of accuracy errors or not, most of the participants claimed that this was not the case since most of the errors that teachers have frequently corrected still occur in students' production. External factors such as learners' psychological state and atmosphere determine whether errors are recommitted or not.

For the question on how students overcome mistakes in writing, some of the participants suggested practice as an ultimate solution. Others argued that without explicit feedback on their pieces of writing, even practice cannot prevent erring from taking place. For the question on the role of feedback in raising learners' awareness of their mistakes, there was a total agreement on that issue.

In a more direct question, the participants were asked about the type of errors that the teachers should focus on while correcting. In response to this question, four participants favoured grammatical mistakes, while only two emphasized meaning and appropriateness errors. The rest of the group went for both types.

Although some responses and reactions to statements in the focus group seemed to contradict the responses obtained in the questionnaire, most of the answers complement and support these results.

2.11. A Sample of Students' Portfolios

While exploring students' portfolios, the researcher has set a number of related questions in mind: what is the most common type of errors that learners make? What type of feedback do they receive? Do they benefit from WCF? Is there any noticeable improvement throughout the portfolios? Is there a possibility for fossilization of a certain type of errors?

To answer these questions, the researcher had to analyse the pieces of writing in the portfolios. First, to seek a possible answer to question 1 relating to the types of errors, the researcher has identified and classified the errors in the portfolios, and classified them into categories, and the results were as follows:

		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Grammatical errors	36.0	36.0	36.0
	Syntactic	25.0	25.0	61.0
	Meaning	23.0	23.0	84.0
	Language interference	13.0	13.0	97.0
	Other	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	

Table 8: Errors in Learners Early Written Production

The table above accounts for different types of errors with regards to their frequency in students' early papers. The errors were classified into grammatical, syntactic, orthographic, and semantic categories. Each category was accounted for in terms of frequency. As shown in the provided percentages, about 36% of errors are grammatical in nature, while 23% pertain to sentence structure. 25% of errors are of semantic or contextual in appropriateness, while 13% relate to language interference errors triggered by orthography- or spelling- errors which were only circled, underlined or scratched on the part of the teacher. The last 3% is a variety of other errors. WCF was provided chiefly explicitly on these categories, except the fourth category, without referring to or providing the correct form. In most of these, the teacher has written a concise remark as to the frequent errors. Examples are: "please pay attention to sentence structure" and "please revise your grammar."

		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Grammatical errors	27.0	34.2	34.2
	Syntactic	10.0	12.7	46.8
	Meaning	20.0	25.3	72.2
	Language interference	15.0	19.0	91.1
	Other	7.0	8.9	100.0
	Total	79.0	100.0	
Missing	System	21.0		
	Total	100.0		

Table 9: The Portion of Students' Errors in Their Late Production

Surprisingly, the most recent pieces of writing in the portfolios have yielded different results compared to earlier pieces of writing. The percentage has significantly decreased to 27% of grammatical errors, 10% of sentence structure errors, with 20 % of errors of meaning, while the 15 % of language errors, and 7% of other errors.

Research instruments employed in the present study has provided the researcher with rich, miscellaneous and complementary types of data. This makes the process of data analysis a bit detailed. However, this enables the present study to gain a deeper understanding of the topic at hand, which allows the researcher to study the issue from different potential perspectives. The section that follows will be devoted to generate, discuss and interpret the results in accordance with salient literature in the field of SLA.

3. Summary of the Findings

After the analysis of the data obtained through the instruments opted for in this study, it was subject to interpretation by the investigator. The eventual results showed that WCF is actually used by a wide range of teachers of composition as a tenable intervention to reflect students' linguistic loopholes in writing. Similarly, students are in favor of the provision of WCF, as they perceive it as a tool that helps them identify their weaknesses and areas that need to be improved in their production. Both implicit and explicit feedback is equally favored by the students as they may, sometimes, complete each other depending on the type of error. On the other hand, the results show that teachers are more likely to emphasize grammatical errors rather than those that influence meaning. Yet, students consider both grammar and meaning as necessary aspects of accuracy and prefer receiving feedback on both. In addition, the results indicated that there is little, if any, negative effects of WCF on students' performance, and that its merits transcend its cons. Students are more likely to understand and hence attend to WCF when it is accompanied with a comment by the teacher. Furthermore, WCF was proved effective in promoting students' noticing, as well as triggering their awareness of the errors they make in writing. In the absence of WCF, errors are more likely to go unnoticed by the students. Significantly, a wide range of errors on which students have received WCF were overcome irrespective of the amount of feedback provided on each error type. Hence, WCF has effectively helped students improve their skills as far as accuracy is concerned. Overall, these inferences have provided potential answers to the research questions addressed in the current study.

4. Discussion and Interpretation of the Results

4.1. WCF and Students' Awareness of Their Errors in Writing

In a wide range of literature, as has been discussed earlier in this paper, the relationship between WCF and the noticing hypothesis is a matter of controversy. The present study has raised the question of whether WCF enhance students' awareness of their errors or not. This question has always been a central focus for researchers in the area. Truscott (1999, 2007) and Krashen (1981) for example, argued that feedback, in its broadest sense, is ineffective and has no positive effect on learners' noticing of their errors, rather, it is harmful and should therefore be abandoned. However, results from the questionnaires yield evidence against Truscott's (1999, 2007) claim. Most of the students denied any negative effects to WCF (see 2 in Table 7). In parallel, based on their experience as EFL students, a vast majority of the respondents were in favour of the provision of WCF, and stress its importance and role in triggering students' noticing. These results can be interpreted as sound evidence that students' awareness of their production may be dependent on the amount of feedback they receive from their teachers.

Within the same framework, relatively similar results were revealed through the focus group. The participants were asked whether WCF helps them notice errors in their writings. Remarkably, the majority of the answers were positive. For example, one of the participants responded: *"my teacher advised me to never start a sentence with a preposition or, and- which I did very often- from then on, thanks to the teacher's remark, I never do so."* This indicates that students themselves are aware of the effectiveness of WCF in promoting noticing. Similarly, there have been numerous studies by prominent researchers that proved that WCF has a vital role in developing students' awareness of the gaps between the target language and their written production (e.g., Doughty, 2003; Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Based on these inquiries, WCF has been widely adopted as a strategy in Focus on Form studies.

In the portfolios, the results show a clear discrepancy between students' early production and late production. The ratio of various types of errors has considerably decreased significantly (see tables 8, 9, 10). This variance can only be justified by the provision of WCF. That is, the teachers' WCF on students' production has promoted their noticing of the systematic errors they frequently made. Hence, the students managed to avoid repeating the same errors in subsequent pieces of writing, which is evidence of their awareness of the gap between the erroneous output and the correct one. This has resulted in a significant improvement in so far as their performance is concerned. This result is consistent with the findings of Schmidt (2001), Doughty (2003) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012). Each of these studies has investigated effects of feedback on students' written production, and has yielded evidence on the role of WCF in promoting learners' awareness.

This being the case, the data gathered for the present study can serve as another argument in favour of the role WCF's in triggering students' noticing and awareness raising. The results from the questionnaires, the focus group as well as the portfolios prove that WCF is a powerful awareness raising device, which enhances students' accuracy and helps them notice the gaps in their output, hence avoid the errors that frequently occur in their production.

4.2. Written Feedback and Accuracy Development

As pointed out by Nunan (2001), producing an accurate coherent piece of writing may be the major concern of language learners. In this regard, the present study assumes that WCF is essential and central to achieving such objective. In the same vein, the results of the present study may provide further evidence as to the centrality of feedback to learning in general, and to writing in particular. As the results indicated in the previous section, most of the answers were in favour of the usefulness of WCF in helping students develop accuracy in writing. Similarly, Ferris and Bitchener (2012) have examined the effects of WCF in relation to accuracy through experimenting three groups, a control group and two experimental groups. The results revealed that the two groups that received WCF significantly outperformed the control group.

By the same token, in order to complement and support the results of the questionnaires, the researcher has conducted a focus group to get in touch with the participants of the study, and to get direct and genuine data from a more controlled environment. To see whether feedback has any observable effects in the long run, the participants were asked whether their performance in writing has witnessed any improvements. The majority of the participants have confirmed this, whereas only few answered otherwise. To justify their statements, those who denied feedback any usefulness argued that *"some mistakes are difficult to correct, even when the teacher's feedback is provided."* This may bring a doubt on whether WCF alone is enough; still, the majority of the voices have confirmed that WCF helped them overcome various difficulties in writing. Interestingly, this can be perceived as additional support to the result of the questionnaire.

To trace the effects of feedback on students' accuracy in the long run, the present study attempted to measure students' progress by analysing their portfolios. The researcher has first identified the most frequent errors he came across in their writings, and then classified them into categories. The results of this examination -as displayed in figures (8), (9) and (10) - showed a conspicuous improvement from the oldest to the most recent production. Between the two categories, i.e., early and recent production, there was a significant variance. Similarly, Bitchener and Knoch (2008), for example, investigated the extent to which WCF influenced learners' accuracy in new pieces of writing. The latter concluded that WCF had a significant impact on accuracy. These results are to some extent consistent with the results of the present study.

While exploring the portfolios, the researcher came across suitable cases which actually illustrate the effectiveness of WCF in accuracy. For instance, a student who has frequently used *"have"* with third person singular, received feedback in the form of a comment saying: *"Always use 'has' for third person singular"*. Surprisingly, no trace was

found of the same mistake in subsequent writings throughout his portfolio. This may serve as a clear evidence that the students have, to a large extent, benefited from their teacher's feedback.

4.3. The Amount of Written Feedback and Students' Uptake

Throughout the course of the present study, it has been hypothesized that WCF may help learners improve their accuracy in writing. However, Debate on whether the amount of WCF determine learners' uptake or not has been of considerable interest to both researchers and practitioners. Ferris (2004) argued that students' uptake is not that much dependent on the amount of feedback. Similar results were found by the researcher through analysing the portfolios. Most of students' uptake resulted from the first instances of direct and explicit feedback provided or two at most, whereas only few needed more feedback. As is conspicuous hereby, students' uptake may not necessarily be dependent on the amount of feedback the latter are provided with but rather on the quality of feedback they receive. To elucidate, what tends to determine students' uptake is not the frequency of WCF; rather, it is the nature of feedback teachers provide and whether the latter is explicit and overt enough, so that the students can attend to it. Here, it may be presumable to make a reference to students' learning styles as well as their preferences. Therefore, it is safe to argue that neither students' uptake nor lack thereof are determined by the amount of WCF the latter receive from the teachers.

In a recent work on WCF and accuracy, Truscott (2007) concluded that "correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately" (p. 270). This may be interpreted as a considerable victory for the proponents of feedback. In this very paradoxical statement, Truscott, though indirectly, admits that the provision of WCF on students' production can be effective as it improves their accuracy. In the present study, a considerable number of the respondents agreed that WCF may sometimes be harmful. Still, this does not imply, at any rate, that WCF is not effective; of course, it is presumable that WCF may at times go unnoticed, and might as well have some side effects depending on the its quality as well as students' learning styles. However, a highly significant number of the respondents agreed that WCF is not harmful as much as it is helpful. Based on these results, and as long as the teacher's main concern is developing students' uptake and eventual accuracy, WCF can be effectively relied on as an effective pedagogical intervention.

The assumed effectiveness and necessity of feedback has received support throughout the history of the issue at hand. Similarly, the findings of this study have led to a number of conclusions in favour of the practice. It can be argued that the latter serves as an effective tool for teachers to structure ill-formed output and guide students to learn what is acceptable and correct in the target language. The present study, despite being a small scale one, has attempted to investigate the issue, and ended up with results that corroborate, and hopefully add to, the findings of previous research.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present piece of research has assiduously endeavoured to examine the effects of written feedback on Moroccan EFL learners' written output. To this end, it aimed at illustrating how far WCF can take a language learner throughout the process of acquiring the academic writing skills. More specifically, the overall purpose of the study is to investigate the multifarious effects of WCF on learner's uptake of the target form and grammatical accuracy development in general. As such, the study might have significant pedagogical implications. First, it sought to add to the existing evidence on the effectiveness of written feedback in improving students' accuracy in writing. Accuracy may be the most problematic aspect of language learning as it necessitates a considerable amount of both input and output. Teachers suffer to get the intended meaning from a certain utterance by a student due to its inaccurate form. Thus, the present study suggests WCF as an efficient focus on form intervention the application of which is supposed to help teachers manage their students' grammatical errors, as a way to best attain an accurate piece of writing. This may also help students notice and repair certain erroneous grammatical aspects in their interlanguage. Besides, WCF may also function as a focus on meaning mediator. As far as 'global errors' are concerned, WCF may be useful in content-based courses when dealing with ambiguous or awkward utterances in which the overall meaning is affected. Furthermore, as it attempts to account for the multifarious effects of WCF on students' pieces of writing, the present study casts light on the different ways in which certain types of WCF can be used by teachers to enhance students' productivity. By and large, what has been stated hitherto calls attention to a need for more awareness as to the role of WCF both as a teaching and learning method.

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