Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on Written Corrective Feedback: Matched or Mismatched?

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Abstract: Studies have highlighted the importance of written corrective feedback (WCF) in developing students' writing skills. While these studies elucidate the necessity of good WCF in teaching writing, there is a dearth of literature that assesses the alignment of teachers' WCF beliefs and practices. This study explicated the teachers' beliefs and practices and reviewed their alignment in terms of extent, scope, and type. This qualitative study adapted a survey-questionnaire from Amrhein & Nassaji (2010), which was administered to 30 English teachers to discern their WCF beliefs. Subsequently, a sample essay adapted from Penny (2001) was given to them to ascertain their practices. Results were compared to check on the prescriptive and practical alignments and showed that the application of beliefs and practices is incongruous. They believe that all inaccuracies shall be marked and be issued directly, yet these were not reflected in the actual practice. Respondents also believe that content and organization errors are most essential yet actuated practice showed most markings being on grammatical and structure errors, with content errors not being given attention to at all. This study proves that teachers have an ideal mindset in issuing WCF, but cannot actualize it. This result reminds teachers to be mindful of their implementation of WCF in writing classes, and make adjustments if necessary to avoid confusion and frustration among the students due to the unfocused marking.

Key Words: written corrective feedback; beliefs; practices; alignment

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a widely acknowledged truth that a teacher has many tasks to accomplish as part of the whole educational process. This truth remains the same even in the language learning process. One of the most taxing tasks of a teacher is providing written corrective feedback (WCF) on student's works. (Enginarlar, 1993 as cited in Jodaie, et al., 2011) Giving feedback especially to ESL students is a must as second language errors are viewed to be a natural part of the language learning process. WCF aims at providing information on the accuracy or inaccuracy of the learners' outputs, based on the well-established language conventions. (Mirzaii & Aliabadi, 2013). This also has a significant impact on the writing performance of language learners (Banaruee, et al., 2018) In fact, it can be considered as a reliable and effective tool in encouraging

learners to start identifying and correcting their errors. Aside from that, it serves as a teachers' tool in communicating to students their current performance and the performance expected from them (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989; as cited in Torkildsen & Erickson, 2016).

According to Trusscott (1996, 1999, 2004), and Ferris (1999, 2004), as cited in Bitchener (2008), the effectiveness of WCF can only be considered effective if the language accuracy of students is measured in newly written output. The results of the study (Bitchener, 2008) showed how students' language accuracy significantly improved in a new writing piece after the WCF had been provided to them. With this, it can be concluded that teachers' feedback has a huge role in the students' improvement. Hence, it is a must for the language pedagogues to identify their deemed purpose for giving feedback. Corpuz (2011), identified the three categories that teachers have for their purposes of giving written error correction or feedback: helping

students to locate errors in writing, helping students improve or enhance their written outputs, and generating students' awareness of their errors. These purposes would guide the teachers in giving appropriate feedback to students' written works. These purposes can be served by being cognizant of the extent, scope, and type of feedback.

These studies show how important feedback is in the writing progress of ESL learners. Despite the copious studies about its significance and positive impacts, little attention is given to the idea that the accuracy by which participants can use separate linguistic categories was highly dependent on the feedback that teachers had provided. (Bitchener, et al., 2005.) This means that the chances by which a student can properly use certain linguistic features are highly affected by the feedback that teachers provide. In connection to this, it was noted that the type of feedback should match the type of linguistic feature that is to be assessed and mastered. However, some studies found several mismatches between teachers' beliefs and practices. Lee (2009) found that teachers tend to focus on language form, despite their belief that good writing is more than just grammatically correct output. Therefore, there is a need to explore more the alignment of the teachers' beliefs and actual practices in giving feedback to ensure that its purpose is indeed served and to prevent unfavorable impact among students.

In this connection, this paper intends to answer the following questions:
1. What are the beliefs of the teachers in giving WCF to students' essays?
2. What are their WCF practices?
3. Are their beliefs aligned with their actual practices in giving WCF?

It is imperative to ensure that the beliefs of the teachers who are giving WCF and their practices are matched to avoid negative implications such as exasperation and skepticism (Mantello, 1997) and students' underperforming and under expectation due to obscure marking (OFSTED, 1996).

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper was guided by the framework of Griffiths (2007) that posits that pedagogues' beliefs and practices are significant aspects in the learning environment as these impact the educational process. This qualitative study, supported by descriptive statistics, took place at the University of the East. Thirty (30) educators from the university's GAS – English unit were chosen purposively based on their current teaching loads as well as on the type of academic outputs their classes produce.

The study utilized two instruments in collecting data: a survey – questionnaire adapted from Amrhein & Nassaji (2010) and a feedback assessment sample essay adapted from Penny (2001). Both instruments were used to collect data which were vital in determining whether a disparity exists between what the participants believe and what they practice. The prior was to identify their set of beliefs relative to the optimal extent, scope, and type of WCF that one should employ in guiding written competency development among students' written works. The latter was to identify their concurrent practices in issuing WCF.

Responses from the questionnaire were subjected to descriptive statistics. These were collected and tabulated using a spreadsheet processor. The first part of the questionnaire was evaluated by computing the percentile equivalent of each option against the total number of respondents. Whereas, the arithmetic mean was used to evaluate the data for parts two and three. Items were then ranked based on the premise of the extent, scope, and type of error correction that they agree with the most.

On the other hand, data from the essay was analyzed by classifying the nature of WCF employed, clustering feedback by type relative to the scope from which each type can be generally classified (e.g. Grammar, Structure, Content, among others), and identifying trends from the tabulated data. Ultimately, both data sets were further analyzed to determine whether it correlatively conforms or deviates from each other. Trends and themes which significantly insinuated on the improvement of students' writing skills were noted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part is divided into three segments parallel with the number of research questions which this study intends to answer.

1. What are the beliefs of the teachers in giving WCF to students' essays?

This is divided into three sections, the teachers' perception regarding the most acceptable extent of WCF that should be given when there are too many errors to mark; the different ways they provide it; and their perceived usefulness of the different types of errors that they may focus when correcting students' writing outputs.

First, most of the respondents believe that it is important to mark all errors regardless of gravity. Relatively, data has shown that a handful of the respondents prioritize the correction of errors that could interfere with properly communicating ideas in a written text. This signifies that in determining error types and extent, teachers would often consider the error's impact on the communication process as opposed to its adherence to writing conventions. Inductively, errors that impact communication can be identified as major, while less impactful deviations are tagged minor. This foregrounds how teachers prioritize which errors to correct as well as which deviations merit detailed feedback.

On the other hand, data further shows that teachers tend to frown upon selective error correction as well as simply providing feedback towards ideas and content and not structure. This emphasizes teachers' belief that feedback should be direct to make it meaningful. Direct WCF is necessary for establishing the rationale behind the correction issued by the teacher. This assumption establishes a necessitated paradigm that error identification and direct feedback are integral elements of each other's meaningfulness and relevance. That is – a direct correction without proper error identification may not be as effective as another where errors are properly identified and vice versa.

Moreover, data shows that although the majority of teachers incline to profoundly issue correction towards both major and minor errors, there are still teachers who would prioritize issuing corrections towards what they would identify as major ones while discrediting less impactful ones. This posits a more practical approach to issuing corrections considering the premise given to respondents when they were asked to answer the questionnaire. Such practical approach is necessitated by the sheer number of written works a teacher might need to issue corrections on either weekly or monthly. Focusing on an error type and providing correction accordingly, can be relatively as meaningful as what can be achieved when providing a holistic correction.

Ultimately, while teachers agree that holistic error identification and correction is necessary for ensuring optimal WCF results, being able to effectively identify what needs to be prioritized depending on the nature of deviations and circumstances impacts not only the effectiveness of the corrections issues but also the quality and breadth of the students' entire academic writing development.

Second, it shows that teachers usually opt to provide direct correction following an error identification. This emphasizes that for corrections to be meaningful, it must be directed to a specific element of the text which needs to be corrected. This also holds true when providing direct corrections even if there are no explicitly identified errors so long as the corrections are made in proximity with the error it aims to correct. Such practice enables the recipient of the correction to appropriately connect the corrections provided with what needs to be addressed as identified in the correction issued.

On the contrary, teachers mostly disagree with the idea of not providing feedback on written work. This can be attributed to the fact that respondents identify the need to appropriately mark all errors with a clear focus on communication – interfering errors as major ones. This also holds true to the provision of personal insights and comments as the majority of the respondents do not see this as objective and meaningful, especially in the context of academic writing.

It can, therefore, be assumed that as teachers practice WCF, a visualization of its optimal structure involves the identification of errors committed to be followed by the appropriate correction for better understanding. It is withholding that as teachers go about WCF, they shy away from providing their personal comment on the content or from not providing any comments at all as this could be seen as something that is both unacademic and ineffective.

Third, teachers generally tend to focus on errors that impact organization and content. The level of importance emphasized in the correction of organizational and content error is not for naught as its impact goes beyond graphology. This parallels other findings that teachers primarily treat errors that impact communication more than any other error found within a text. This is further reiterated by teachers noting that punctuation errors are critical errors that need to be addressed as this could not just impact the economy of reading a text but also the development of its content and meaning.

Conversely, teachers are not as critical in seeing the importance of correcting grammatical, spelling, and vocabulary errors. While it cannot be denied that grammar and vocabulary affect the development of meaning, its impact on communication may not be as critical as compared to organization and content. This idea generates an understanding that teachers tend to issue a correction in the effect of how the content can be understood by the audience as opposed to the text's adherence to grammatical rhetorical standards.

Ultimately, the data disclosed that teachers, more than anything else, focus on the aspects that would greatly affect the audience's understanding of the written message – content and organization of ideas, rather than grammar and vocabulary.

2. What are their WCF practices?

This is parted into three sections that include the teachers' general actuated extent, focus/scope, and type of WCF.

First, it can be noticed that most of the study participants marked most of the major errors and the rest marked only a limited number of major errors. No one marked all the errors present in the sample essay, regardless if this is a major, a minor error, or an error that interferes with communicating one's ideas. Aside from this, no one marked errors regarding the ideas and content of the essay. This only divulges the idea that teachers do not maximize the giving of feedback to the students and do not give emphasis on the errors in presenting and validating ideas that are essential in understanding one's writing piece.

Second, the data revealed that the majority of the teachers' WCF focused on grammar, but no attention was given to the content. Most of the participants gave more emphasis on the major errors in grammar which include subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, confusion with verb tenses, and prepositions that could alter the meaning of the presented ideas rather than the minor errors which include the articles, antecedent, and contractions.

It is also noted that little attention was given to the structure of the essay in giving WCF. Some teachers focused more on the major errors of the essay's structure which includes the spelling, cohesive devices, and use of apostrophes that could change the meaning of the ideas stipulated in the essay rather than the minor ones which include the punctuation marks, spelling, capitalization, spacing, formatting, and numbers.

This shows how prescriptivists and structuralists the teachers are that they give much significance to the grammar and structure rather than the content. This could also mean that the major errors on the grammar and structure that were given attention to by most of the respondents, highly affect their understanding of the essay that they do not care to validate anymore the ideas presented.

Third, it is noticeable that the majority of the respondents consider indirect WCF as a strategy in issuing corrections towards students' written work. This presents an assumption that most of the respondents, although eager to issue corrections, provide their students with some sense of independence and eagerness which could potentially make them more conscious of those errors so as not to consistently commit them.

3. Are their beliefs aligned with their actual practices in giving WCF?

This section shows that teachers' beliefs and practices in giving WCF are generally mismatched in terms of extent, scope/focus, and type.

Firstly, in terms of extent, the majority of the respondents believe that all errors need to be marked regardless of its type. However, actuated WCF practices as presented through the feedback assessment sample essay reveal that while respondents marked critical errors, not every error was issued a correction on. Also, the disparity is extended towards the respondents' belief that errors interfering with the communication of meaning

should be corrected as this was not actuated by the participants during the practical feedback assessment. This disparity asserts that while the respondents' beliefs are ideal, their actuated practices gear towards the practicality.

Similarly, in terms of focus or scope of errors identified and errors corrected, the majority of the participants believe that organization and content are most useful to correct, however, most of the corrections issued by the respondents were aligned with grammatical components. This posits that while there is a conscious awareness that organization and content play a more crucial role in successfully writing a text, teachers still retain their prescriptivist take towards academic writing. This is because the majority of the teachers were primarily trained on grammar and structure but not necessarily on organization and content. It can also be true that they might have been too bothered by the extensive grammatical errors that it preoccupied their judgment leading to their inability to focus on organization and content.

Lastly, in terms of type, respondents believe that directly providing students with corrections to specific errors will be much more meaningful to the recipients of the WCF process. This suggests that the respondents prefer to gear towards direct WCF more as compared to other types. However, during the actuated assessment, the majority of the participants resorted to using the indirect type to issue their corrections. It can be deduced that while the majority of the respondents wanted to take time to provide corrections and identify specific errors for focus, it is not practical. The economy of practicing WCF directs practitioners to resort to more practical means instead of their preferred type and strategy. Therefore, their use of the indirect approach to issue WCF aims to help them maximize their time in providing WCF to copious writing outputs as well as to engage students in independently correcting their errors through the feedback they were given.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to elucidate the beliefs or perceptions, examine the practices, determine how much of alignment there is between these beliefs and practices of teachers, with regards to giving WCF.

Though there have been numerous studies done regarding WCF both in light of teacher and student beliefs, perceptions, and practices, not much of these deal with examining any possible disparity between beliefs and practices.

This study was able to identify that a disparity does exist between what teachers hope to do inside their classroom as opposed to the things that are actuated during the practice of WCF. Such disparity is evident on the extent, the focus or scope, and the type of corrections they issue to their students. Findings revealed that while teachers know and understand the giving of WCF, this does not translate to their practices inside the classroom. This is most likely because they must issue WCF in the most efficient way possible considering the number of tasks that they have to accomplish every day.

Researchers who wish to emulate a similar type of study can bring about improvements in terms of data gathering procedures by adding classroom observations as a means of collecting data. It will also be helpful to broaden the scope of the study by including teachers from other disciplines who frequently provide feedback to students' written work. These improvements would make for a richer study and would allow future researchers to come up with more relevant data.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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