Investigating Teacher Written Corrective Feedback as a Formative Assessment Tool

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Abstract
The present study seeks to lay the foundations for a firmly-grounded understanding of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) as a Formative Assessment (FA) tool through student writing. More specifically yet, it is concerned with examining the intricate correlation between Moroccan English Language Teachers' (ELT) attitudes and practices with respect to the way they understand and apply FA by means of WCF on students' written productions. To that end, the study seeks to investigate this issue in the light of the following guiding questions: What beliefs do Moroccan ELT teachers hold about FA and WCF? How do these teachers provide WCF to their students during the writing lesson? To address these questions, we have opted for a mixed method approach that includes questionnaires for 110 teachers, document analysis of 30 writing productions and a follow- up semi-structured interviews with teachers. Date has been interpreted through an Explanatory Sequential Design. Inspired by Lee's (2009) analytical model and Perumanathan (2014) study, major findings have been presented regarding mismatches. These findings have revealed strong mismatches between teachers espoused beliefs concerning WCF, as a formative assessment tool, and their actual classroom practices. Finally, the study sets some implications for teachers, supervisors underlining the implementation of WCF in classroom practices.

Key words: Beliefs, formative assessment, feedback, mismatch, writing

Introduction
Research (Ellis, 2009; Borg, 2001; Burns, 1992; Lee, 2009) into the interplay between teachers' beliefs and their influence on classroom practices have revealed that students writing skills develop in proportion to their teachers' perceptions of the role of WCF in fostering those skills. In the context of writing pedagogy and given the intricate interplay between formative assessment and written feedback, recent studies (Al Shahrani, 2013; Chen, 2012; Lee, 2009; Ho, 2014; Johansson & Nilsson, 2017; Perumanathan, 2014**;** Tuck, 2012, among others) have tried to uncover the beliefs that underlie teachers' practices in order to identify the factors that contribute to effective feedback. This last argument provides the rationale for the present study.

In Morocco, the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and especially the teaching of writing, has undergone many shifts and trends. These shifts and trends have found their way into an extensive body of research into writing pedagogy (Abouabdlkader, 1999; Bouziane, 1999, 2002; Chaibi, 1996; Idihiya, 1990; Habbaz & Lmqadem, 2017; Oulbouch & Zyad, 2015; Zyad, 2015).

Recent innovative approaches adopted by the Moroccan TEFL Guidelines (2007) like the Standards-based Approach (SBA) and the Competency-based Education (CBE) set relatively high expectations with regard to the teaching of the skill of writing as a process. The process approach to the teaching of writing calls for a change in teachers' perception as well as practices concerning learners' compositions. That is, writing needs to be viewed as a sustained process of drafting and revising where *sources of feedback* are student writers themselves, their peers and teachers. The current study aims to examine one of these sources of feedback, namely, teacher WCF as a formative tool to help learners become effective and independent writers.

Although the Moroccan Pedagogical Guidelines, ministerial notes, teachers' guides continue to assert the importance of teacher WCF as a formative tool, very few studies have been made in the EFL domain to examine written teacher feedback from both students' perspective and teachers' perspective. Oulbouch and Zerhari (1994) find that "the general tendency was to 'focus on surface-level features…such as grammar and mechanics [local issues] but little interest is attached to content and organizations [global issues]" (p.33). In the same respect, Mabchour (1997) investigates the issue of WCF from a purely textual and an accuracy-driven perspective. These studies, it seems, have not attempted to question teachers' and students' perceptions of written feedback and its underlined potential in ensuring students' language development, hence its formative role and value, which is the focus of the current study as mentioned earlier.
  The following questions guide this research paper:

1. What beliefs do ELT teachers hold about Formative Assessment and WCF?
2. How do ELT teachers provide WCF to their students during the writing lesson?

Theoretical Framework
  Formative Assessment
Formative Assessment (FA), as assessment for learning, constitutes an empirically well-grounded pedagogical perspective (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, b; Bloom, 1969; Bloom et al, 1971; Carless, 2012; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Crooks, 1988; Stiggens & Chappuis, 2005; Sadler, 1989, 2013;

Scriven, 1967; Tomlinson, 2006; Trochim, 1998; Wiliam, 2006, 2010; William & Thompson, 2008). According to Scriven (1967), the first to use the concept of 'Formative Evaluation', the term 'formative' is used to refer to the role that assessment could continually play to help refine and ameliorate the field and craft of syllabus design and curriculum development. However, Scriven's premises is not elaborated 'out of the box' in that he perceives of evaluation as the end product of learning rather than an on-going process that takes place during teaching and learning

Black and Wiliam (1998a) contend that the improvement of classroom assessment could result in the improvement of classroom learning on account that formative assessment can lead to significant learning gains and can help narrow the achievement gap while benefitting all learners. Sadler (1989), laying more emphasis on 'learning outcomes', argues that a theory of evaluation would have "less relevance for outcomes in which student responses may be assessed simply as correct or incorrect" (p.119).

Written Corrective Feedback
In the writing classroom, the merits of written feedback cannot be overlooked (Fisher & Frey, 2013; Harmer, 1983; Keh, 1990; Lam, 2017; Ur, 1996). When feedback on an essay or research paper is summative-oriented, there is less likelihood that it will change the quality of learners' performance, as there is less room for them to redo, or rethink, their work (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Ellis (2009) outlines a typology of written feedback, which incorporated a variety of strategies that most researchers have adopted in their studies. Although Ellis's typology continues to have a strong influence on both researchers and teachers, its academic appeal has been met with deep scrutiny (Van Beuningen et al,2008, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch,2010; Sheen,2007; sheen et al, 2009; Bitchener, 2008; Truscott & Hsu,2008).

The Research Design
First, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of the quantitative and the qualitative methods, if used alone, the present study has relied on a mixed-method approach. Second, in view to having reliable data through different tools, our concern has been to check the validity of the results obtained from the three tools: document analysis, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

As far as the interpretation of the study results is concerned, the "Explanatory Sequential Design", which is typically a two-phase design to collecting quantitative and qualitative data at different times, has been opted for. The sampling design is the non-probability sampling. That fits this small-scale research study. The sample includes both males and females with varying teaching experience and taking into consideration the rural an urban difference (table 2). Subsequently, the study is conducted on a segment of the target population that is representative of the entire population concerning the most salient characteristics, namely gender, age, socio-cultural background, pre-service training, and teaching experience. The teaching experience is also so varied as far as seniority is concerned.

The teacher questionnaire is made up of four interrelated sections (table 1), in addition to the introduction and the respondents' background. Each section corresponds to a specific research question. We opted for a 1-7 scale with the end values only anchored (e.g. to strongly disagree and

strongly agree). Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated on the scores of the participants (teachers and students who completed the questionnaire twice. The correlation coefficients varies from 0.69 to 0.87 with an overall reliability that reaches (r=0.90, p<0.001).

Table 1 Components *of the Teachers' Questionnaire*

Section	Area of investigation
Section one	Teachers' perceptions vis-à-vis FA
Section Two	Teachers' perceptions vis-à-vis WCF
Section Three	Teachers' implementation of WCF techniques
Section Four	Challenges in implementing WCF

The Demographics of the Informants

One hundred and six EFL teachers from the directorates of El Kelaa Des Sraghana and Chefchaouen are the respondents of the teachers' online questionnaire. To outline the features of our questionnaire respondents, we will describe the following features: the areas our informants work in, gender, age, work experience, and academic and professional qualifications (table 2 and 3).

Table2: *Distribution of teachers according to gender, area, school type and training*

Gender		Teaching areas			School type		Previous training on WCF		
Male	*Female*	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Semi-urban*	*Private*	*Public*	*Yes*	*NO*	*Not Sure*
27%	37%	60%	22%	18%	18%	82	30%	66%	4%
ENS	CPR	FSE	CRMEF	1-5	6-10	+10	BA	MA	PhD
51%	16%	11%	22%	13%	66%	21%	47%	39%	14%

rding tch is from nally, attempts are made to explain the mismatch based on the data collected.

Mismatches Concerning FA

First, the majority of the surveyed teachers (87%) show a strong agreement towards FA as an assessment *for* learning and not an assessment *of* learning. They have positively responded to statements about the purpose of FA to promote learning and enhance teaching. However, within the same section, more than 69% state that they award grades for students' writing productions. This goes against the rationale of FA which aims at improving and polishing learners' skills rather than making judgments and grading their productions. Another piece of evidence in support of this 'graded' oriented tendency comes from students' questionnaire. The majority of the respondents claim that teachers award them grades from their writing productions. This explains why considerations of evaluation rather than assessment guide students' reactions towards teachers' feedback.

Second, 59% of the respondents believe that they feel confident in carrying out FA practices in the classroom. However, when interviewed, **ALL** the teachers admit they have no prior training on how to implement FA strategies in the classroom. Another source of contradiction comes from the analysis of teachers' feedback on students writing productions which comes in a product-oriented 'flavour'. Finally, 60,7% of the respondent teachers assume that students understand the purpose of formative assessment. Yet, this belief is not supported by students who do not see any value behind assessing their writing productions.

Mismatches Concerning Assumptions of WCF

First, the majority of the participants show strong agreement that there is a real need for teachers to provide WCF on students' writing. However, only 18% strongly agree that WCF helps students learn to locate their own errors and analyse them. This means that teachers fail to figure out the formative role of WCF. Second, concerning WCF techniques, 68% claim that teachers should vary their error feedback techniques. This claim can be contrasted with teachers' actual practice in correcting students' writing productions, as well as from students' surveys. In this respect, students 'responses reveal that they felt uncomfortable about their teachers' use of the same mode of feedback irrespective of the type and the peculiarity of the error.

Third, a considerable number of teachers (43,41% Strongly Agree, 49,46% Agree) believe that students need positive written feedback in order to motivate them. Yet, upon analysing the way teachers respond to students' errors in writing, it seems that teachers address mainly the mechanical deficiencies in students' writing. Another support for this mismatch comes from students' questionnaire who strongly believe that teachers' concern is to locate 'weaknesses' and negative areas in their feedback. Teachers' writing comments tend to focus more on irregularities than merits of students' products. This again runs against one of the basic principles in WCF which encourages teachers to make their feedback as motivational and as positive as possible.

Mismatches Concerning WCF Techniques

Teachers (through the survey as well as the interview) claim that they provide feedback on student errors selectively. They also argue, during the interview, that selective feedback is worth-providing on account that teachers save time and students get more focused feedback than holistic or comprehensive feedback.Such practice, however, is not consistent with their belief. When analysing their real feedback of students writing productions it appears that teachers opt for the comprehensive mode of feedback provision. Another support for this mismatch comes from students who also remark that teachers tend to correct all their mistakes.

The second mismatch is concerned with prioritising either form or meaning. During the interview, the majority of the teachers claim that they pay most attention to meaning and content. These teachers claim that quality of writing product depends not only on accuracy but also on the development of ideas and organization. Similarly, in the analysis of the results of the teachers' questions it appears that 32% of the respondents claim to address the meaning or organization of the work. However, analysis of the students' questionnaire shows that teachers focus on language form in their comments on student writing. This prioritisation of accuracy is also supported by evidence from feedback document analysis of students' written productions which also reveals that teacher seem to attend to form over meaning.

Thirdly, during the interview as well through the questionnaires, teachers continue to assert themselves as the prime source of feedback. However, by analysing students' questionnaire, it seems that students rarely turn to teachers to discuss the content of the feedback with their teachers and prefer, instead, to discuss it with their peers. The majority of the respondents continue to complain that teachers' feedback is too vague and too general (58,3%).

As graph 1 clearly shows, the strategies that are mostly used by teachers when they correct their students' writing assignments are: IWCF (17%), CWCF (16%) and Local issues WCF (16%). Such a fact can be accounted for by the teachers 'major concern of drawing students' attention to almost all kinds of errors they commit with respect to their mastery of the target language form (local issues)
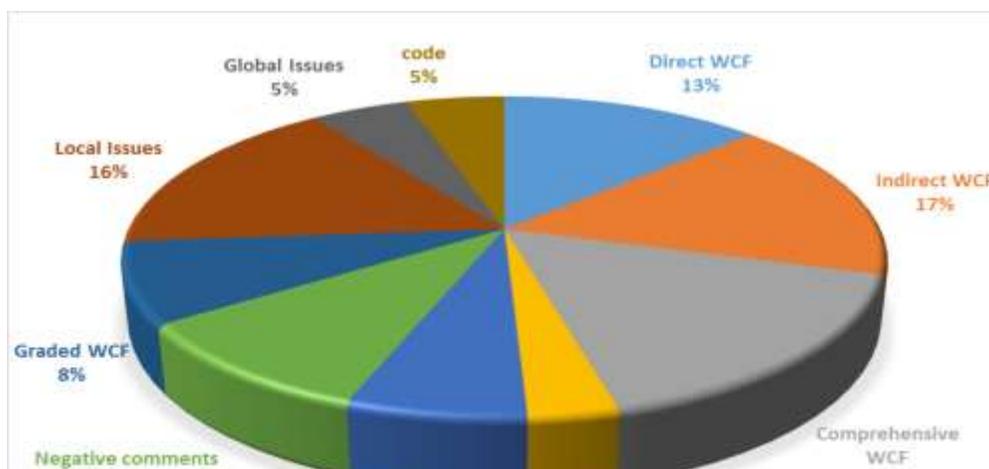
Graph1: The distribution of correction strategies

Teachers tend to tackle all kinds of mistakes throughout the students' productions, hence the overuse of IWCF and CWCF, instead of targeting certain linguistic features at a time by being selective, thus using SWCF , which might be more helpful for students to develop their mastery of the target language gradually and confidently. Besides, by adopting the comprehensive, local and indirect approach, teachers might frustrate their students and demotivate them when the latter receives a paper tainted in red pen from top to bottom. According to research, selective error feedback on several patterns of error is more beneficial than comprehensive error treatment, on account that the latter is exhausting and overwhelming to both students and teachers.

What might increase students' frustration is the absence or scarcity of positive comments as shown by the graphs. Teachers tend to focus on students' errors and weaknesses and neglect positive points in students' papers. Teachers should praise students' achievements as well. By creating such a balance between positive and negative comments, students would be motivated to work on their areas of improvements to add them up to the few achievements they have realized so far. What we have noticed across the sample of students' writings that we examined is that not only are teachers' comments rare and harmful most of the time but also inappropriately placed.

That is, teachers tend to provide comments, be it on local issues or global ones, either at the end of the writing paper or on the front page under the grade. In both cases, the comments are disassociated from the points they refer to, which might confuse students and give them no insight about the errors the observation indicate.

Implications and Recommendations

Upon gathering data, analysing and interpreting the results, several implications can be inferred at various levels from the current study relating to teachers, curriculum designers as well as supervisors and training planners. Teachers have to render of revising an integral part of their feedback sessions and increase its frequency. They should encourage students on how to use feedback effectively, in the sense that the amount of feedback does not necessarily determine its quality. Teachers should provide feedback that is explicit and clear. Concrete, motivating and positive feedback should be prioritised. Alternatively, teachers might ask students to identify feedback comments that they found useful or decide what type of feedback they consider most useful and explain why.

Teachers should be trained pedagogically on how to teach writing effectively and engagingly so as to make of their WCF a formative tool to help students attain long-term gains. As the document analysis revealed, for example, most teachers lack the subject matter knowledge required to identify and teach students to work with global errors; i.e. errors related to organization and content. We believe supervisors must hold intensive training to inform teachers of the FA pedagogy with respect to the writing instruction.

It is also the syllabus designers and curriculum developers as well as policymakers' duty to dissociate the writing component from the textbook and design special writing course books for students and teachers on teaching writing. Policymakers should introduce and initiate new assessment regulations that would put much emphasis on FA and include self-assessment. Such procedures are likely to offer in-service courses and developmental projects for teachers on FA/ AFL (Assessment for learning).

Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate how EFL Moroccan teachers perceive of and implement WCF as a FA tool. We tried to shed light on how FA is being understood and what perceptions teachers hold about it in relation to WCF. The study also tried to unearth the sort of classroom practices teachers make to comment on students' writings. To achieve that objective, the study adhered to the mixed-method approach. This study's findings have important implications for the ELT in general and the teaching of EFL writing in specific. Some recommendations for different ELT community and school stakeholders have also been put forward.

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