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Review of Written Corrective Feedback for L2 Development

By John Bitchener & Neomy Storch, *Multilingual Matters*, 2016

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Written corrective feedback (WCF) has been increasingly attracting researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) as well as second language (L2) writing practitioners. Bitchener and Storch, two renowned WCF researchers, define WCF as “a written response to a linguistic error that has been made in the writing of a text by an L2 learner” (p. 1). This increasing interest in WCF is understandable because the implementation of WCF is time-consuming as well as pedagogically imperative. However, it is widely known that learners keep making the same error, and thus teachers’ efforts do not pay off easily. Therefore, with the increasing number of published research, it is beneficial to review studies about WCF to synthesize findings and identify issues to guide future research. To this end, *Written Corrective Feedback for L2 Development* comprehensively reviews WCF studies, especially those conducted under cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, the two major driving forces in this domain.

The cognitive perspective has been extensively applied to SLA studies. Bitchener and Storch first touch upon the difference between learning and acquisition and other dualisms in relation to this difference. Documenting this basic concept is critical because WCF studies almost always report the development of learning, the one better represented by explicit knowledge given that writing involves the cyclical awareness of language form. In addition, the authors summarize how explicit knowledge could be converted into implicit knowledge based on skill acquisition theory. Also, the development model surrounding WCF is theoretically suggestive of how and why learners do or do not benefit from WCF. While acknowledging individual and contextual factors at work, Bitchener and Storch claim that learners' attention is mandatory for WCF to be effective: unattended WCF is unlikely to contribute to modified accurate output, or the accurate revision, which is the first step toward consolidation or the accurate production in a new text.

The fundamental question about WCF is whether the provision of WCF is effective for L2 learning. To answer this question, Bitchener and Storch survey studies before 1996 and identify pervasive methodological flaws. However, the authors report that recent studies are more sophisticated thanks to Truscott's counterargument against WCF. Their survey of studies since 1996 show that WCF is effective for learners' editing ability as well as their performance in a new piece of writing. The question, then, is what kind of WCF is more effective than another. To answer this inquiry, Bitchener and Storch present studies comparing multiple types of WCF. They list comparisons about WCF of different explicitness, elaboration, and comprehensiveness. Despite a number of studies, as Bitchener and Storch suggest, any conclusions are currently hard to draw due to the limited number of well-designed empirical studies as well as replication studies.

After introducing the cognitive perspective, Bitchener and Storch present sociocultural theory. What distinguishes this perspective from the cognitive perspective is that it considers learning to be dialogically co-constructed knowledge instead of something independent. To tease apart the framework, this chapter presents three key tenets: the Zone of

Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, mediation, and activity theory. In this theory, L2 learning occurs through the mediation between learners and external assistance, where learners gradually internalize previously other-regulated items and become capable of performing independently. Studies informed by this perspective usually involve multidimensional observations, such as the source of WCF, the perception of WCF providers, and prior learning experience. Due to the complexity of phenomena on question, studies of this kind usually recruit a few participants and report qualitative results. Bitchener and Storch claim that discussing WCF from this perspective helps us better understand the reason underlying its effectiveness and ineffectiveness.

Then, empirical studies designed under sociocultural theory are presented. In terms of scaffolding, Bitchener and Storch emphasize the importance of WCF that takes individual differences into account. This statement is intuitively reasonable because, for instance, as previously speculated, the effectiveness of metalinguistic explanation would be subject to learners' prior knowledge about the target language. Still, the authors call for more studies to prove the superior effects of scaffolding WCF compared with random WCF. Their survey on computer-mediated WCF studies also indicates the influence of tools on interaction between a provider and receiver of WCF. The subsequent section discusses WCF from the perspective of activity theory, where a variety of factors organically affect teachers' operationalization of WCF, learners' response, and learners' provision of WCF. Given the complexity of the WCF scenario informed by reported studies, it would be justifiable that the sociocultural perspective identifies issues in a complementary way to the cognitive perspective.

In the last chapter, the authors put forward important recommendations for future research. First, for the cognitive perspective, though the collection of studies indicates the positive effectiveness of WCF, their findings are limited to certain linguistic features that are usually simple rule-based, and studies are needed to test the generalizability to more idiosyncratic features. Second, the authors suggest that future studies should be solidly designed so that a purer comparison with past studies can be made. Third, they argue for the necessity of exploring individual differences, such

as working memory and belief, which may moderate the effectiveness of WCF. Furthermore, the authors encourage a more longitudinal implementation of WCF treatment instead of a one-shot treatment. Last, they call for studies that closely examine why, how, and under what conditions learners benefit from and dismiss WCF.

Regarding studies driven by sociocultural theory, the commonplace drawback is its small scale and the lack of a pre-posttest protocol. Therefore, Bitchener and Storch suggest that future studies should recruit more participants to report generalizable findings about L2 development measured as product. However, at the same time, they admit that WCF believed to be effective under sociocultural theory, such as teacher-provided scaffolding, is extremely time-consuming. One recommended complementary technique is the use of computer. Basing their claim on computerized dynamic assessment, the authors recommend future WCF researchers to explore automated scaffolding WCF. Also, future studies should explore to what extent engagement depends on a mediation tool, such as learners' first language and computer. Bitchener and Storch ask for further application of activity theory to WCF studies to heuristically reveal factors underlying facilitation and impediment of L2 learning in WCF.

In the six chapters, there is no doubt that the authors comprehensively cover and critically evaluate studies about WCF. However, any publication suffers from its limited scope. First, the authors' definition of WCF does not completely reflect WCF practice or studies. For instance, when a face-to-face conference is held, a provider and receiver would end up only with oral negotiation about the written text without written comments. Also, teachers may use visual feedback in the form of video. Thus, limiting WCF to "a written response" seems to exclude error correction in other modalities that should be welcomed as another mediation tool. Second, there are more advantages of automated WCF than what is presented in the book. Specifically, though teachers usually offer WCF after the completion of writing, computer programs, such as Grammarly, provide WCF even during the task. The importance of timing of feedback has been documented in educational psychology as well as in SLA, and thus further recommendation for future studies can be made on this feature as well.

In spite of these limitations, the authors' work is tremendously valuable for all who are interested in the topic, such as graduate students, writing instructors, and researchers. Especially for practitioners, the authors' caveat about the interpretation of individual studies is helpful in order for them not to mindlessly apply the results to their practice. It is commonly understood that teachers cannot fully apply results of research to their actual classroom, and, instead, they need to translate the findings into their context. Furthermore, from the researcher's perspective, I am grateful for their encouragement of approximate replication studies, particularly for quantitative studies comparing various types of WCF. Accordingly, I am sure that the book is one of the references that present and future WCF researchers and practitioners will find extremely useful.

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