

Written Corrective Feedback in EFL Context: Contextual and Individual Factors Influencing Students' Responses

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Abstract

This study explores the written corrective feedback (WCF) behaviors of English as a foreign language (EFL) students in an EFL context and the individual and contextual factors that shape these behaviors. Ten students from the English language and translation department were interviewed and their WCF behaviors were explored. The participants were aged between 19 and 23 years, and had studied at least two writing courses taught by different instructors at a Saudi University. The findings revealed that most students had positive affective attitudes toward WCF. Most of them appreciated receiving both positive and negative comments, as the former were encouraging, while the latter helped improve their writing skills. Students' behavioral responses to WCF varied; while some students were eager to read the feedback and correct their errors, others could correct them only when a second draft was requested. Additionally, most students relied on instructors for error correction, while only a few attempted more autonomous approaches to correction using textbooks or electronic resources. This variation in behavior could be attributed to the students' different levels of motivation to improve their writing skills and their different individual goals for the writing course. Moreover, students' responses to WCF were influenced by contextual factors such as the type of WCF received, the instructor's professionalism and relationship with the students, number of assignments, and time constraints.

Keywords: EFL, feedback, WCF, writing, culture

1. Introduction

Writing skills are essential for English as a foreign language (EFL) students' learning and professional academic careers (Hyland, 2013). Teachers employ different approaches to teaching writing skills and strategies to respond to students' compositions. Among these, WCF is common in EFL writing classrooms (Wulf, 2021). It is widely believed that WCF improves students' writing accuracy (Chandler, 2003); therefore, writing teachers believe that one of their main responsibilities is to provide helpful WCF for their students' writing (Rotim, 2015).

Feedback is an integral part of language classrooms (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). The last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the role of written corrective feedback (WCF) in the field of second or foreign language learning (Rajab, Khan, & Elyas, 2016). Many studies have investigated the effects of different types of WCF on various aspects of students' writing skills (e.g., Bitchener, 2008).

Although WCF, an indispensable part of writing classrooms, has received much attention (Saeli, 2016), there has been insufficient research on learners' individual and contextual differences (Ferris, 2010). However, some research suggests that individual and contextual factors may play significant roles in both teachers' feedback and students' responses to it (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

One area of WCF research that has drawn significant attention is students' attitudes, perceptions, and preferences regarding written feedback (Elwood & Bode, 2014). However, the reasons for these attitudes, perceptions, and preferences remain under-researched. According to Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010), it is important to examine learner, situational, and instructional variables in WCF research to obtain a deeper understanding of research findings.

Research on WCF in the Saudi context has mainly focused on teachers' and students' perceptions and preferences in relation to WCF and the effectiveness of different types of feedback (e.g., Alkhatib, 2015; Rajab, 2018). The current study aimed to investigate students' responses to WCF and demonstrate how their responses are shaped by a number of individual and contextual factors. Although research on the effect of learners' factors on their WCF engagement is limited (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012), it has been suggested that considering individual learners' characteristics may contribute to the effectiveness of WCF (Waller, 2015). As Hyland (1998) states, "good feedback can only really be defined with reference to the individual writers, their problems, and their reasons for writing" (p. 275).

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Saudi university students respond to instructors' WCF?

2. What are the individual and contextual factors that influence students' responses to WCF?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feedback and Second/Foreign Language Learning

Lightbown and Spada (2006) defined corrective feedback as “any indication to the learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect” (p. 197). Feedback is an important tool for improving students' writing skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Different feedback approaches can be used in writing classrooms, including peer feedback, teacher–student writing conferences, computer-mediated feedback, and teacher WCF (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback not only identifies students' weaknesses and provides them with strategies to deal with them but also aims to identify students' strengths and enhance them (Dabboub, 2019).

2.2 Feedback in Foreign Language Writing Classrooms

2.2.1 Effectiveness of WCF

Ashwell (2000) found that students who received WCF produced more accurate linguistic forms in their revised texts than those who did not receive WCF. Similarly, Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) observed that after students received feedback, the accuracy of their writing improved not only in the revised texts but also in their new ones. By contrast, Truscott and Hsu (2008) reported that students' accuracy improved in their revised texts, but not in their new texts, indicating that the WCF the students received was not effective. Owing to this ongoing debate, more studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of WCF (Roshan, 2017) and the moderating factors that may hinder its desired effects.

2.2.2 Types of WCF

According to Ferris (2006), two types of WCF exist: direct and indirect. Direct feedback is defined as “the provision of the correct linguistic form by the teacher to the student” (Ferris, 2006, p. 83), while indirect feedback “occurs when the teacher indicates in some way that an error has been made – by means of an underline, circle, code or other mark” (Ferris, 2006, p. 83).

2.2.3 Perceptions, Attitudes, and Preferences Regarding WCF

According to Alkhawajah (2016), students' individual preferences may influence the effectiveness of WCF. For example, when a group of students prefers a certain type of WCF because they think it is more useful, they are more likely to pay more attention to it and will therefore learn more when their preferred type is used (Schulz, 2001). By contrast, some researchers have suggested that undesirable feedback may be frustrating, demotivating, and, consequently, ineffective for students (Jamoom, 2016).

Concerning the extent of WCF, some studies have reported that students prefer to correct all their errors (e.g., Elwood & Bode, 2014) because they believe this will help them avoid repeating the same errors in future writing. However, for some students, correcting all the errors may negatively influence their confidence (Zhu, 2010). According to Elwood and Bode (2014), students prefer unfocused feedback because they lack confidence in their grammatical competence.

Regarding the type of WCF (i.e., direct, indirect, or metalinguistic), some researchers have found that ESL learners prefer to receive indirect feedback (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001) because this helps them develop their self-editing skills (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Others have reported that EFL learners prefer to receive direct feedback (e.g., Elwood & Bode, 2014). For example, Elwood and Bode (2014) reported that Japanese EFL students prefer to receive unfocused and direct feedback on all surface errors. This shows that the instructional context (ESL versus EFL) can be an important factor influencing students' WCF preferences.

Another reason for the different preferences of EFL and ESL students could be that EFL classes are teacher-centered, whereby students depend on teachers to correct their errors, whereas ESL classes are student-centered, whereby students are provided with indirect feedback and encouraged to correct their own errors (Jamoom, 2016).

In addition to the instructional context, WCF research has shown that student attitudes and preferences regarding WCF can be influenced by other factors. Rotim (2015) suggested that students' proficiency levels affect their attitudes and preferences regarding the focus of WCF. Students with high proficiency levels may have more positive attitudes toward WCF as they have fewer errors; thus, they are more confident about their writing skills and more comfortable with WCF; conversely, students with low proficiency levels may feel anxious about writing in a foreign language and receive feedback that shows their weaknesses (Rotim, 2015).

In addition to proficiency levels, students' attitudes and preferences regarding WCF can be influenced by other factors, such as teachers' ways of providing WCF (Jamoom, 2016). When teacher feedback focuses on grammatical errors, students may think that grammar is the most important aspect of writing; therefore, they prefer to receive feedback on grammatical errors (Dabboub, 2019).

2.3 Students' Engagement with WCF

Without awareness of how students respond and feel about their feedback, teachers may not be aware of the impact of their WCF practices (Chen, 2012). Studies have investigated how students respond to WCF and the strategies they employ to deal with feedback (e.g., Chiang, 2004; Ellis, 2010; Ferris, 2006). For example, Chiang (2004) conducted a study compared the strategies junior and senior EFL students used when they received written comments from their teachers. The findings showed that senior students attempted to become more independent by employing strategies such as checking dictionaries and grammar books. Contrarily, junior students relied more on their teachers and peers for error correction. This study suggests that students' level of experience could be a factor influencing their

behavioral responses.

Ferris (2006) explored how students revised their texts after receiving WCF. She reported that 80% of the students deleted errors and wrote correct substitutions, 10% made no corrections, and the remaining 10% made incorrect changes. The number of errors in the five categories significantly decreased between the first and last assignments. Therefore, this study provides evidence that feedback improves the accuracy of student texts.

Despite its importance, students' affective engagement with WCF in the EFL context has not received much attention in previous research (Purnomo & Pahlevi, 2021). Studies exploring students' affective responses to teachers' WCF have reported different results. For example, students feel proud (Ferris et al., 2013), frustrated (Zheng & Yu, 2018), happy, satisfied (Zacharias, 2007), and self-confident (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

Mahfoodh and Pandian (2011) explored the affective reactions of eight English majors to written feedback. The results showed that students' affective responses to feedback varied from positive to negative. For example, students liked to receive feedback on their texts and felt happy when they received praise for their texts, drafts, or ideas, which indicates that positive comments resulted in positive feelings for students. However, some students stressed the need for balance between praise and criticism. Furthermore, although most students were satisfied with the feedback, there were some negative responses. These included disappointment, frustration, dislike, or surprise and were associated with certain types of issues with the feedback, such as the students' inability to understand the teachers' comments.

Similarly, Mahfoodh (2016) investigated the emotional reactions of undergraduate students in the English department of Yemeni University. The study revealed that students' emotional reactions varied from one student to another, and included rejection of feedback, acceptance of feedback, happiness, satisfaction, surprise, dissatisfaction, frustration, and disappointment. Additionally, he pointed out that negative reactions can result from negative evaluations, harsh criticism, and miscommunication between students and teachers, whereas positive reactions can be ascribed to teachers' suggestions for improvements and the simplicity of using feedback.

2.3.1 Factors Influencing Students' Responses to WCF

According to Evans et al. (2010), research on WCF must examine the variables that influence learners' engagement with and reactions to WCF. These variables include learners' characteristics or individual differences (nationality, learning style, first language, beliefs, values, attitudes, future goals, and motivation), situational variables (teacher, learning atmosphere, and physical environment), and instructional variables (the instructional methodologies used to promote learning). These variables interact and influence the extent to which learners respond to feedback (Ellis, 2010).

Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) conducted a case study involving 48 international graduate students at an Australian university. Their findings indicated that students' engagement with and use of WCF could be influenced by several linguistic and affective factors, such as the type of errors, type of feedback provided, levels of proficiency, attitudes and beliefs, and goals regarding WCF. They concluded that affective factors played a pivotal role in feedback retention.

Similarly, Saadat, Mehrpour, and Khajavi (2017) examined the factors affecting Iranian undergraduate EFL students' engagement with WCF. The study revealed that students' motivation was an important factor influencing their use of WCF; when students had no desire to learn, they ignored teachers' feedback. Students' goals were another significant factor: when feedback was in line with the students' goals, they saw it as informative; otherwise, they ignored it. Furthermore, the study indicated that students' trust in their teachers and teachers' positive and negative comments were significant factors influencing their responses to feedback.

Exploring the experiences of two undergraduate Chinese students with WCF, Han (2019) found that learner factors, such as language abilities, metalinguistic knowledge, prior knowledge of WCF codes, motivation, and learner beliefs, were the most influential factors affecting student engagement. The identified contextual factors included the characteristics of the WCF; the characteristics of the errors; interpersonal relationships (teacher-student or student-student); teacher's instructions; teaching materials; curricular guidelines; goals, requirements, and assessments; students' access to online resources; and beliefs about the roles of teachers and students.

3. Methodology

To answer the research questions, semi-structured, online, one-on-one interviews were conducted to explore students' responses to WCF and identify the factors that underlie these behaviors. The questions guiding the interviews were adopted from previous studies (Dabboub, 2019; Han, 2019). Finally, all interviews were conducted in Arabic, the students' native language, which enabled them to talk in greater detail about their experiences and feelings.

3.1 Participants

Ten Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners enrolled in writing courses were asked to take part in this study. The participants were aged between 19 and 23 years, and they were all majoring in English and translation. All participants had studied at least two writing courses taught by different instructors at a Saudi University, and they were native Arabic speakers who had studied English as a foreign language for at least seven years at school.

3.2 Analysis

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative data analysis includes "preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts or

image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (p. 180). Therefore, the data collected from the interviews were prepared for analysis and organized into themes to make them more meaningful. Thematic analysis, a method for analyzing qualitative data, was used.

4. Findings

4.1 Students' Behavioral Responses to WCF

The students claimed that they carefully read the instructors' comments on the writing assignments. However, after reading the WCF, the way students responded to the feedback varied, to some extent, based on diverse factors. For example, three students corrected their errors and submitted a second draft to the instructor. One student said that it was necessary to submit a second draft to ensure the required corrections and a lack of repetition of the same errors in the future. Thus, her goal to improve her writing skills increased her engagement with WCF.

Meanwhile, six students claimed that they made corrections directly to the original draft or took mental notes of the errors without submitting a second draft to the instructor, if not required. One student indicated that their responses to the WCF were influenced by certain factors. She corrects the errors when she has time, which suggests that time constraints may prevent her from responding to feedback. Additionally, obtaining a better score encourages another student to respond to the feedback seriously and resubmit her text. This shows how individual goals affect responses to feedback and how each student might be motivated differently.

Moreover, even though some students think that correcting errors and submitting a second draft are helpful, they avoid doing so if the instructor does not explicitly ask for them. This shows that students are sometimes willing to make an effort to improve their writing skills, but they need their instructors to oblige them to work harder by requesting a second draft.

Another important issue regarding students' responses to WCF is the process by which they correct errors. Some students adopt an independent approach and use different resources such as the Internet, textbooks, and discussions with classmates to find the correct forms. Another student preferred that the instructors provide direct feedback because some students hesitated to ask for clarifications. Other participants stated that asking instructors for further clarification was their first option when they failed to correct their errors, which again shows the responsibility of instructors in welcoming and encouraging their students to discuss their errors with them.

4.2 Students' Affective Responses to WCF

Students' affective responses to feedback included their attitudes toward WCF and their emotional reactions to the instructors' positive and negative comments. All participants had a positive attitude toward WCF, as they believed that feedback was necessary to identify and correct their errors, and consequently, to improve their writing skills. For example, one student mentioned that immediate feedback was necessary to learn how to write correctly. Another student stressed the need for feedback to improve her writing and reinforce what she had learned.

The analysis of the students' affective responses to the WCF showed that their emotional reactions to the written comments were similar to a certain extent. Most students highly appreciate positive feedback, as they claim that it encourages them and motivates them to perform better in their next assignments. One of the participants claimed that she likes positive comments because they are encouraging. She likes to receive compliments from people and hates criticism. However, she appreciates the negative comments that aim to help her improve without demotivating her.

Conversely, some participants mentioned that they recognized the value of negative comments more than that of positive ones. They pointed out that negative comments about their writing were more important than positive comments, as they needed to strengthen their abilities. They prefer to receive constructive criticism, which they find necessary to continue evolving. Finally, receiving negative comments, according to some students, results in a lasting effect that makes them persist.

Six participants claimed that a combination of positive and negative comments provides a balance that is preferred over having only positive or negative comments. Receiving both positive and negative comments is better as the former motivates and increases students' confidence in their writing skills, whereas the latter is necessary to clarify the issues and, consequently, improve their writing skills, according to some of the participants.

One of the participants pointed out that receiving only negative comments is frustrating. She further explained the psychological impact of frequently receiving comments that demotivated students and resulted in hatred for the course and instructors. Thus, she believes that positive comments serve to appreciate the effort of the student, and give the student a sense of accomplishment in mastering a variety of writing skills.

4.2.1 Contextual Factors Affecting Students' Responses to WCF

4.2.1.1 Time Constraints

Almost all participants agreed that time constraints impacted their responses to WCF. When students do not have enough time to correct their errors (during exam periods or when they are simultaneously occupied with multiple assignments), they may not pay the same attention to WCF.

4.2.1.2 Type of WCF Provided

According to the interviews, this factor may affect students' responses to WCF and hinder the effectiveness of the feedback provided. Sometimes students ignore feedback when the instructor provides a type of non-beneficial WCF in their opinion or when they do not prefer it. For example, Dania, who did not correct her errors after receiving feedback, explained that because she had received indirect feedback, that led her to ignore it. According to Dania, indirect feedback is ineffective because she believes that students need their errors explicitly corrected to improve their writing skills.

4.2.1.3 Instructor's Professionalism and the Instructor-Student Relationship

According to some participants, trusting the instructor's professionalism (i.e., their manners, teaching skills, and specialization in writing) or having a good relationship with the instructor is a factor that affects how they value and respond to their feedback. Furthermore, one of the participants believes that the language the instructor uses in the comments is very important. She stated that she might ignore feedback if the instructor's words are harsh and frustrating.

4.2.1.4 Number of Assignments

To compose and correct many writing assignments is another factor that negatively affects some students' responses to WCF. Too many assignments cause some students to lose interest in the feedback, become tired and bored, and even hate the course.

4.2.2 Individual Factors Affecting Students' Response to WCF

The motivation to improve their writing skills and the goal of obtaining good grades seem to be the two principal factors driving the students in this study to pay attention to and respond to WCF. Almost all participants claimed that they corrected their errors in an attempt to obtain a good grade, and to improve their writing skills. Although both reasons are significant for students, receiving good grades appears to be a priority for half of them. This demonstrated how grades can motivate students to respond to feedback. Additionally, it reflects the students' lack of intrinsic motivation to read and respond to WCF to improve their writing skills.

By contrast, one participant explained how grades can sometimes be demotivating. Losing many marks in one essay could frustrate students, resulting in a loss of interest in the grades of future essays. Subsequently, they may ignore feedback and stop focusing on improving their writing skills.

While students ensure that receiving a good grade motivates them to read and respond to the feedback, some stress the grades the instructors give for the first draft assignments. They believed that they should be allowed to resubmit assignments after receiving feedback. In this case, students were more motivated to correct their errors and obtain better grades.

5. Discussion

5.1 Students' Responses to WCF

The analysis of the interviews indicate that participants deal differently with the feedback they receive, guided by their own goals, needs, abilities, experiences, and circumstances. As Zheng and Yu (2018) argue, student engagement with WCF is dynamic and varies at the individual level. This confirms the complexity of feedback as an activity affected by a range of contextual and individual factors for both providers and receivers. Therefore, a standardized and fixed strategy for providing feedback is unlikely to be appropriate (Westmacott, 2017). Writing instructors must account for students' individual differences and instructional contexts when making decisions regarding WCF (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

The findings confirm the literature on variations in students' responses to WCF. This is influenced by both contextual and individual determinants. Thus, WCF should be tailored to students' needs, and the sociocultural context in which it is provided should be considered.

5.1.1 Individual Factors Shaping Students' Behavioral Responses to WCF

The data revealed that most participants were willing to read comments and correct their errors. According to the students, this is guided by an inner motivation to improve their writing skills and avoid repeating the same errors in future texts, and by the goal of obtaining a good grade. This reflected the impact of students' personal factors on their responses to WCF.

The impact of students' internal characteristics on their responses to WCF has received much attention in the literature because these variables usually have the greatest impact on the learning context (Evans et al., 2010). Several studies have explored what and how personal factors, such as students' motivation, goals, previous experiences, attitudes, beliefs, proficiency levels, personality, language aptitude, and language anxiety, influence their engagement with WCF (e.g., Mahfoodh & Pandian, 2011; Roshan, 2017).

5.1.1.1 Willingness to Improve Writing Skills

In this study, students' intrinsic motivation to improve their writing skills was one of the most essential personal factors that enhanced their engagement with WCF. Almost all the students believed that error correction was necessary to improve their writing skills. Thus, they read and corrected their errors, hoping to produce better texts in the future. This intrinsic motivation drives students to consider their teachers' comments seriously and carefully.

This is consistent with the findings of Saadat et al. (2017) and Han (2019) who concluded that student motivation is a significant factor in implementing WCF. According to Saadat et al. (2017), when students do not have the desire to learn, they neglect feedback. Conversely, when they are self-efficient in writing, they utilize the comments. Regardless of the type of WCF, students do not improve if they are not committed to improving their writing skills. If students feel that these skills will not be applied in the future, they will underrate or ignore

writing instruction (Evans et al., 2010). In this study, all participants majored in English Language and Translation and were expected to study various related courses that may lead to a career in translation. This requires good writing skills, making it a possible motivation for encouraging students to benefit from WCF.

In this context, different levels of motivation influence students' engagement with different types of WCF (Westmacott, 2017). Westmacott (2017) suggested that indirect WCF is appropriate for highly motivated students. In the present study, some students corrected errors and willingly resubmitted assignments, whereas others corrected errors in the same draft without resubmitting them. This might reflect the different levels of motivation in favor of the first group. This suggests that it is not only necessary to motivate students to respond to WCF but also to consider different motivation levels when choosing an appropriate approach to WCF. For highly motivated students, as Westmacott (2017) stated, indirect WCF may be appropriate because this feature encourages them to discover the correct forms. For less motivated students, direct feedback might be more appropriate to counterbalance the lack of motivation to discover how to rectify issues in their assignments.

5.1.1.2 Students' Goal of Error Correction

Most participants said that obtaining high grades was equally important for improving their writing skills. Half of the students stressed that, although correcting errors to improve their writing skills is important, receiving a good grade is always a priority. Thus, they read the comments, discussed the errors with the instructors, corrected them, and tried to avoid repeating them, with the ultimate goal of receiving a high grade at the end of the semester.

In previous studies, students' goals in a writing course were found to be one of the personal factors affecting their behavior. For example, Al Kharusi Al-Mekhlafi, Al-Bulushi, and Abdulraheem (2019) stated that well-established goals positively affect how students benefit from feedback. By contrast, a lack of strong goals prevents students from reviewing their texts (Uscinski, 2015). Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) reported that the students' goal of improving the accuracy of their texts is one of the most significant affective factors in their retention of WCF. Explaining the impact of the learners' goals on their utilization of WCF, Sadaat et al. (2017) claimed that when the students felt that the feedback they received was in line with their inner goal, they considered it informative. Otherwise, they often view it as useless and neglect it.

Here, getting a good grade in the writing course was the goal that guided the behavior of the majority of the interviewed students. This is in accordance with Chong (2018), who found that for some students, the final score was the prime concern because it influenced the likelihood of graduating and, consequently, their future careers. However, when grades are the motivator, students are probably not interested in what they learn (Kohn, 2011) and focus on obtaining a high grade with the least effort (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2011). In this case, instructors are responsible for employing students' desires to achieve a high grade by engaging and responding to WCF to improve their writing skills.

5.1.1.3 Misunderstanding the Real Purpose of WCF

In contrast to the majority of students for whom error correction was significant in both improving their writing skills and obtaining high grades, some students stated that they did not correct errors unless the instructors requested a second draft that guaranteed extra grades for the correction. This behavior suggests that these students misunderstood the desired goal of feedback, which was to improve their overall writing skills and not to obtain better grades by correcting errors and resubmitting assignments.

In addition, this behavior reflects students' lack of interest and motivation regarding the improvement of their writing skills, while highlighting their focus on grades as the learners' sole motive to correct errors. This lack of motivation to improve could be attributed to students not expecting to apply their writing skills in the future (Alhojailan, 2015, 2021; Evans et al., 2010). This could be the effect of the foreign language learning context, which does not require communication in the foreign language in the real world, and may reduce students' intrinsic motivation to improve themselves (Li & Li, 2012).

5.1.1.4 Reliance on the Instructors as the Source of Knowledge

Most students participating in the present study said that they preferred to ask the instructor directly when they were unable to correct their errors. This reflects the students' reliance on the instructor as the main source of knowledge. This is understandable, because students want to ensure that the corrections they make are required and adequate. In fact, the nature of writing may play a role in the students' need to review their skills and texts with a more competent person (i.e., the instructor) (Saadat et al., 2017). Additionally, this behavior reflects students' lack of trust in their peers as reliable sources of feedback (Saadat et al., 2017) and possibly their lack of confidence in their ability to investigate and correct issues in the texts.

Moreover, Saudi students' reliance on instructors is justified by the teacher-centered educational system in Saudi Arabia (Abdullah, 2020). This could be the reason students feel frustrated and ignore indirect WCF: based on their past experiences, they expect the teacher to "spoon-feed" them the corrections. According to Soleimani and Rahimi (2021), this could be the effect of the instructional context (i.e., the EFL context), which is more teacher-centered; hence, students expect their instructors to help explain their errors. If they do not, they may feel that their instructors are not doing their duty.

Furthermore, the students participating in the present study were at lower academic levels at the university; thus, they may lack autonomy, be highly dependent on their instructors for guidance, and may not be trained enough to search for corrections by themselves. This further suggests that students' proficiency levels play a role in managing feedback. This agrees with Isnawati (2018), who found that students at

low proficiency levels are more dependent on their instructors, whereas proficient learners are more independent. Moreover, Orts and Salazar (2016) reported that low-proficiency students prefer to correct their errors directly, whereas highly proficient learners prefer correcting errors themselves.

5.1.1.5 Employment of Other Resources in Error Correction

A few students claimed that they used different resources to correct their errors, leaving questions for the instructor as their last option. They discuss errors with their peers and search for the correct forms and usages in their textbooks or on the Internet. This exemplifies student autonomy. Comparing the autonomous students with the majority of participants, who preferred to depend on the instructor, supports the idea that students' individual differences (i.e., different personalities in this case) affect their behavior regarding WCF. Ellis (2010) considered learners' personalities as one of the individual factors that may affect their engagement with WCF.

5.1.1.6 Effect of Technology on Dealing with WCF

In this study, one student used technology to write and review her work. When writing texts, for instance, she uses the "Look Up" feature on her phone. Additionally, she consulted websites on which language learners had written questions about their language usage. In addition to the technologies mentioned by students, automated WCF (AWCF) websites (e.g., Grammarly, WhiteSmoke, and PaperRater) can help learners correct errors and improve the quality of their text (Ranalli, Link, & Chukharev-Hudilainen, 2017). For example, Link, Mehrzad, and Rahimi (2020) reported that both the group that received teacher feedback only and the group that received teacher feedback and AWCF improved in accuracy; however, students in the second group had higher retention over time.

5.1.2 Students' Emotional Responses to WCF

In addition to behavioral responses, students react emotionally to WCF (Ellis, 2010). According to Ellis (2010), students' affective responses to WCF include their attitudes toward and emotional reactions to WCF. In the current study, the interviews revealed students' positive attitudes toward WCF. Moreover, it revealed students' emotional engagement with the comments they received. Considering how students feel when they receive WCF is necessary because it affects their reactions to feedback (Azizi & Nemati, 2018).

5.1.2.1 Positive Attitude Toward WCF

All participants had a positive attitude toward WCF, as they believed that feedback was necessary to understand and correct errors. This finding is consistent with previous studies that reported Saudi students' positive perceptions of WCF (e.g., Rajab, 2018). Having a positive attitude toward WCF could be the first step in caring for and benefitting from WCF.

5.1.2.2 Appreciation for Combining Positive and Negative Comments

Most participants explained their preference for receiving both positive and negative feedback in their texts. They justified their need for positive comments as motivating, increasing their confidence, and giving them a sense of accomplishment and appreciation for their efforts. This is consistent with the findings of Zacharias (2007), who reported the positive impact of praise on students' motivation, confidence, and sense of accomplishment.

In contrast to the majority of the participants, two students valued negative comments more than positive ones. They explained their preference as being because the positive comments concerned the skills or aspects that they had already mastered. Although positive comments may result in temporary positive feelings, they are not as important as negative comments, which require improvement. Hamouda (2011) found that both students and teachers place higher importance on criticism than on praise because it indicates issues in writing and encourages students to work harder.

5.1.2.3 The Impact of Exclusively Negative Feedback

Although the students appreciated the instructor's negative comments for helping them understand their weaknesses in writing, receiving negative comments without any encouraging words might have a negative effect on the students' affective and behavioral engagement with WCF. For example, Lamar said that when the instructor only criticizes her text without mentioning its positive aspects, it causes frustration, especially when it occurs repeatedly. Students' frustration, in this case, may lead them to lose confidence in their abilities, and they may lose hope of improvement and, consequently, neglect WCF because of the emotional impact of criticism. This proved to be accurate in the case of Samron, the student in Hyland's (1998) study, who lost confidence in her writing skills and, consequently, was not motivated to respond to WCF after receiving mostly negative comments.

5.1.2.4 The Impact of Saudi Culture on Students' Reactions to Written Comments

Considering the students' interviews, the majority wanted instructors to combine both positive and negative comments. This indicates that moderating criticism with praise is the norm in Saudi culture, as claimed by Danielewicz-Betz and Mamidi (2009). However, as mentioned before, students did not object to negative comments or find them insulting, which suggests that young Saudis may be more open to criticism, especially in learning contexts, and understand their value in learning and instructors' goals when providing them. This is consistent with Grami and Alshenqeeti's (2013) study of male undergraduate Saudi students, which reported the willingness of the majority to accept teachers' constructive and well-founded criticism.

5.1.3 Contextual Factors Affecting the Extent of Response to WCF

5.1.3.1 Type of WCF Provided

This factor affects both behavioral and affective responses to WCF. When students receive feedback that they do not find effective or helpful, they may feel lost or frustrated, to the extent that they ignore it. For example, some participants said that complete indirect feedback, especially in the form of codes, confused them and consequently neglected the comments. This is in line with Saadat et al. (2017) and Al Kharusi et al. (2019), who found that if students think that feedback is not informative, they tend to ignore it. This demonstrates that the strategy adopted by instructors in providing WCF could be one of the most significant determinants of how students respond.

5.1.3.2 Time Constraints

Almost all the participants pointed out the impact of time constraints on their engagement with WCF. According to most students, because of their busy schedules, especially during exam periods, they may not pay the same attention to comments, postpone error correction or correct all errors. Studies have highlighted the impact of busy schedules on the task of managing WCF management. For example, Hamouda (2011) and Ferris et al. (2013) mentioned time constraint as an external factor that affects the way students respond to and benefit from WCF. Thus, regardless of how motivated students are or their feedback quality, if they do not have enough time for revision, they probably do not benefit from the feedback (Evans et al., 2010).

5.1.3.3 Instructor's Professionalism and the Instructor-Student Relationship

According to some participants, the instructors' manners, teaching styles, and relationships they create with the students may enhance or decrease students' engagement with WCF. Chong (2018) found that a positive impression of the instructor positively affected students' engagement with WCF because they trusted the instructor's professionalism. Additionally, they may be more motivated to increase their instructors' expectations. In addition to professionalism, students' good relationships with the instructor increase their understanding of the feedback style, which leads to better engagement with WCF (Chong, 2018). These findings suggest that students need to view their instructor as knowledgeable and, from a psychological perspective, willing to help them improve their writing skills (Saadat et al., 2017).

However, not all students reported that their relationship with or impression of the instructor affected their response to WCF. Lamar, for example, said that regardless of her view of the instructor, she always paid attention to comments because she needed to learn how to write. This is in agreement with Saadat et al. (2017), who stated that, regardless of their attitude toward the instructor, some students would accept feedback because it is necessary to improve a certain skill or performance in a course.

5.1.3.4 Number of Assignments

Four students said that they might ignore WCF when they have many writing assignments and receive demanding WCF. Evans et al. (2010) argued that being overwhelmed by feedback negatively affected students' responses. However, the number of assignments considered to be "many" varies from one student to another. Some students found that the more they practiced writing or received WCF, the more their writing skills advanced. Hence, the impact of the number of assignments on students' engagement with WCF varied across students.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the WCF-related behaviors of EFL students at a Saudi university and determined the factors that shaped them. The findings showed that the students' responses to WCF varied. Some students corrected their errors and resubmitted the assignment for re-evaluation; others corrected the errors on the same draft without resubmitting it; and the third group corrected the errors only if the instructors requested resubmission of the assignment. When correcting errors, most students depended on instructors' guidance if they were unable to correct errors on their own. A few tried to use other resources, such as asking peers, reviewing textbooks, or searching the Internet.

Regarding the affective aspect, all students had a positive attitude toward WCF. Most participants preferred to receive both positive and negative comments. Positive comments support them, as praise is motivating and encouraging and indicates appreciation for their efforts, leading them to experience increased confidence. Conversely, criticism is necessary to clarify the weaknesses of students writing skills and help refine them.

Students' reactions to WCF were guided by their motivation to improve their writing skills and the desire to obtain good grades in the writing course. Context-related factors such as the type of WCF received, instructors' professionalism and their relationship with the students, time constraints, and the number of assignments affected students' WCF-related behaviors.

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