

Written corrective feedback strategies:A systematic review

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Abstract

In the last few decades, written corrective feedback (WCF) in Second language acquisition (SLA) has held great importance for L2 researchers. Technically, WCF consists of different forms, scopes, and tones compared to oral feedback and types and strategies. Truscott's claim (1996) about the practicality of grammatical corrections became the reason for many researchers to investigate the matter more in detail. As WCF is directly related to teachers and students, it is equally significant to consider the psychology of learners who adopt feedback that when, where, and how much feedback they can process according to their capability. All these aspects assisted researchers in broadening their range of research to plan vibrant research designs to cover all mechanisms involved in the feedback process. Not only the question of debate is teachers' and students' perception about WCF but also the effects of different WCF strategies. The present paper aims to bring forth the rational, systematic review of the recent studies from 2018 till 2022 conducted on written corrective feedback strategies, specifically direct and indirect feedback type followed by a metalinguistic explanation as to the most frequent way of providing feedback by teachers. The data displayed the learners' inclination towards direct written corrective feedback as the preferred type over indirect WCF. This paper will assist new researchers planning to explore this varied domain to understand what learners perceive, prefer, and how any WCF type influences them.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, writing proficiency, WCF feedback types, strategies, direct and indirect feedback, EFL preferences

Introduction

Traditionally, feedback in second language acquisition (SLA) employs various strategies where a teacher assists the student while pointing out errors to revise, improvise, and then re-write so that quality of production may be possible. For the sake of exploring the written corrective feedback effect on the written production of students, researchers have opted diverse research methods with or without research flaws and found mixed results. The research has always investigated feedback in two ways, written and oral, with different designs and objectives. Written corrective feedback mainly consists of two types direct and indirect feedback type.

Since written corrective feedback is a two-way process, a teacher provides corrections and comments on students' written productions. In response, students rectify their errors and improve their language production. There is much evidence that most teachers prefer to provide their students with comprehensive or focused feedback. Ellis (2009) brought forth a typology of written corrective feedback in a systematic three categories, direct written corrective feedback, indirect written corrective feedback, and thirdly metalinguistic explanation. He explained the feedback process depicting three types through an example by the teacher providing feedback. For instance, Sentence example: At present, Technology has progressed tremendously in every field of life.

Direct WCF: In this case, the instructor might replace the incorrect helping verb "had" or error into the correct form as "has," and the student will get the correction straight.

Indirect WCF: Another way of feedback can be underlining or circling the incorrect form or errors in the written sentence without any correct form mentioned or any other indication or clue of the error.

Meta-linguistic explanation as WCF: In this form of feedback, the instructor might indicate the incorrect expression and correct with some explanation about the nature of the error.

The tone of WCF as a psychological approach:

Written corrective feedback is a vast concept involved in different strategies and types, but the focus, scope, and tone of written corrective feedback carry equal significance. Focus refers to certain error types on which teachers pay special attention or target structures to focus while providing feedback. The scope covers a macro level as an objective of the lesson taught and then deciding how to provide feedback. However, the tone of feedback directly connects to the adaptation of a learner; it affects not only performance but also how a learner feels after getting the feedback. The tone of feedback includes negative feedback and positive feedback. Negative feedback highlights the learner's weaknesses and areas that need improvement, whereas positive feedback means a kind of appreciation and acknowledgment if a learner has

produced quality written production. It is equally essential to keep learners' individuality while providing feedback since all students do not take the provided feedback in the same way. There are many factors involved; however, the priority of WCF strategies is always to improve learners' written proficiency and practical learning.

Written corrective feedback types

Since the last few decades growing research on WCF has majorly focused on finding types that may prove to be more helpful than the other. These types have made WCF so diverse in research design. SLA researchers have categorized various WCF types as direct and indirect WCF, meta-linguistic explanation, error coding, focused and unfocused, and so on. Direct WCF means when teachers directly correct the errors and provide students with the correct form of their mistakes on their writings. As Ellis (2009) suggested, "direct written corrective feedback refers to the provision of correct form on learners' work, which can be treating or eliminating unnecessary items, providing a missing element, or writing the correct form of error over or near the error occurred."

Indirect WCF refers to underlining or circling the errors without any corrections or explanation, and students themselves must look for correct forms of their mistakes. Hendrickson (1980) describes indirect feedback, "It can be done by circling, underlining, or inserting any sign to indicate a missing word, or sometimes instructors place question marks where they find any ambiguous production." Metalinguistic explanation, instructors provide corrections and explain the reason and logic of errors. "Meta-linguistic explanation refers to providing an explicit explanation of students' error and its nature" Ellis, (2009). Focused WCF refers to a situation where teachers focus on some targeted errors to provide feedback, for instance, verb forms or prepositions. Many researchers have conducted studies to determine the effects of focused feedback on students' writing ability. Unfocused WCF means comprehensive feedback on all types of errors, not specific ones. Unfocused feedback has gained mixed results as students do want to get feedback on all of their errors, whereas some consider it frustrating to have so many red marks on their written production. Error coding means providing codes on errors to indicate errors or types of errors as 'Vb' for verb error 'Sp' for spelling errors. It is frequently used in public sector schools where the number of students in each class is much, and it is hard for teachers to provide such detailed feedback always.

Written corrective feedback and learner's proficiency level

A significant factor influencing the whole feedback process and its results is the learner's previous knowledge and ability of the targeted learning language. A learner's language proficiency should be taken as its previous background knowledge for future language learning planning, Loewen & Reindres (2011). A learner's language proficiency is also significant evidence of his tendency to grasp feedback provided whether he/she will accept it or not in a particular situation. So, it is favorable that instructors already know about the learner's previous background knowledge of the targeted language. It can be concluded that high academic achievers can be provided with direct WCF as they tend to self-correction, and this way, they

will get more self-confidence to learn faster (Van Beuningen et al., 2012). previous studies have attempted to find a visible difference in the effectiveness of direct WCF and indirect WCF and concluded conflicting results. However, some studies show students' preferences towards certain feedback types (Robb et al., 1986; Hosseiny, 2014; Nematzadeh, 2017). Some studies resulted in students who liked to get indirect feedback over direct or other feedback types (Eslami, 2014; Lalande, 1982). On the contrary, some research studies displayed results showing the preference of direct feedback type over indirect (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Van Beuningen et al., 2008, 2012). An argument has been raised over feedback preferences that it may be the error types those studies adopt while research causes the difference in effects, not the WCF types themselves (Bitchener, 2017).

Literature Review

Written corrective feedback and WCF strategies have always been well-focused research topics for SLA researchers. Since Truscott's claim (1999) against grammar correction, this field has been of great interest. Some early research on WCF involving the control group presented inconclusive results about feedback type preference; however, learners' accuracy improved in all studies (see Table 1).

Table 1

Early research summary

Study	New writing	Research Instrument	Level of participants	Research findings	Does accuracy improve?
Bitchener (2008)	yes	Picture story writing	Low-intermediate ESL	Feedback types effect	yes
Bitchener & Knoch (2008)	yes	Set of pictures for story writing	Low-intermediate ESL	No type of feedback effect	yes
Bitchener & Knoch (2009a)	yes	Picture description	ESL low intermediate	No effect	yes
Bitchener & Knoch (2009b)	yes	Picture description	ESL low intermediate	No	yes
Bitchener et al. (2005)	yes	setter	ESL intermediate	post Feedback type showed the difference	yes
Ellis et al. (2008)	yes	Reading-based narration	University students	EFL No difference in the feedback type	yes
Hartshorn et al. (2010)	yes	Short essays of different	Adult language learners	Feedback type	yes

		styles		displayed difference	
Sheen (2007)	yes	Reading-based narration	ESL intermediate	Feedback types showed different effects	yes
Sheen et al. (2009)	yes	Reading-based narration	ESL intermediate	No feedback type effect	yes
Storch (2009)	yes	Data commentary & essay	Advanced ESL	Mixed findings	yes
Truscott & Hsu (2008)	yes	Picture based narration	EFL intermediate	No	yes
Van Beuningen et al. (2008)	yes	An email explaining a topic by using pictures	L2 learners of Dutch high school	Yes	yes
Van Beuningen et al. (2012)	yes	Essay writing	Dutch L1 and L2 students	yes	yes

(Saragih, Madya, Siregar, & Saragih (2021) conducted a research study to investigate how students perceive WCF and their expectations. The study found learners to be adoptive and positive about written corrective feedback, and they truly understand the significance of WCF over error omission and be better writers in the future. The study explored that the direct feedback type is preferred over other types, and it is easy for learners to grasp their errors when teachers are correcting them. Trabelsi (2019) also reported the same findings where learners display a satisfied attitude towards provided feedback because it was according to their expectations and desired type. Listiani (2017) and Mulati (2018) stated that students' positive perception of WCF's needs to improve their writing proficiency. Teachers and instructors widely use written corrective feedback to assist learners in improving their writing skills (Jui-Jung et al., 2017). A sufficient amount of research has shown that students take their teacher's feedback into account, and teachers provide feedback to their students to help them be proficient in writing (Sritrakam, 2018; Raza, 2019). Some findings showed that students displayed negative feelings towards WCF (Marrs & Zumbrunn, 2016). Sometimes, learners do not comprehend their teachers' feedback, and they may not follow it in the future (Ganapathy et al., 2020). Another issue can be stated as it is sometimes difficult for teachers to balance feedback to the frequency of errors. Further learner's adaptation to feedback is another step to make the process successful (Aljasir, 2021). Under certain circumstances, it can be said that sometimes teachers are not trained enough to provide effective feedback. However, a vast series of research establishes direct feedback type to be highly favored and wanted by learners since direct error correction is provided to the students (Aseeri, 2019; Saeli,

2019). In another research by Mubarak(2013), over 46 university students reported favorable effects of written corrective feedback on learners' writing proficiency. Alharbi's (2016) study on 50 University students displayed positive effects of WCF types, and participants showed a positive attitude towards feedback provided by teachers.

Al-Sawalha,(2016) conducted a study with Bachelor participants about their perception and consideration for WCF, and the study resulted that they think WCF is positive and beneficial provided by their teachers. Many researchers have conducted meta-analyses and synthesis on research done in the field and displayed mixed results. Most of the studies showed positive effects of WCF on learners' writing skills, and these studies experimented on different feedback types (see Table 2).

Table 2

A meta-analysis conducted on WCF studies

Authors	Number of studies included	WCF types	Findings
Truscott (2007)	Empirical studies(12)	With correction and without correction	Feedback type made a difference
Storch (2010)	Research studies(11)	Direct WCF and indirect WCF	No evidence of vivid feedback efficacy
Biber et al. (2011)	Research articles(306)	Different WCF	Inconclusive results
Kang & Han (2015)	Empirical studies(21)	Different types of feedback	No noticeable difference between focused and unfocused feedback type
Liu & Brown (2015)	Empirical studies(44)	Error coding,direct feedback,meta-linguistic clues	Mixed findings
Lim & Renandya's (2020)	Research studies(33)	Direct and indirect	No significant difference was shown.

Research Questions

The current study intends to respond to the following research questions

1. According to included research, which WCF strategy proved to assist in improving learners' writing proficiency?
2. What were research methods adopted to investigate the effect difference on WCF types?

Method

The purpose of the present study is to bring forth fruitful summarized data, including recent empirical studies conducted involving direct and indirect feedback types with or without metalinguistic explanation.

Search procedure

The present systematic review aims to summarize research published from the year 2018 till the beginning of 2022, and for this, ERIC, Google Scholar, and ProQuest databases were searched. Studies were searched using keywords related to the theme and concepts of the research inclusion criteria (Table 3).

Table 3

Consolidated theme and concepts for search

Theme	Concepts
Types of WCF	Direct, indirect, metalinguistic explanation
Writing tasks or tools	Essay writing, story, picture description
Participants	Students, learners
Research design/method	Groups, experimental, control

Inclusion criteria

A total of 190 studies were initially identified using thematic and conceptual keywords. After scrutinizing the search under inclusion criteria, 57 studies came under it, including review studies, meta-analysis, and review synthesis. Since only empirical studies fall for the objective of the study, by extracting conceptual research, 12 empirical research articles were selected to be systematically reviewed under

- studies with a focus on direct, indirect, and metalinguistic feedback types
- participants learning English language as a foreign language of the second language
- only empirical studies should be included
- empirical studies with a control group should be included.

The studies selected for the review were coded by considering information in six categories (see Table 4)

Table 4

The coding scheme of the research studies

Base information of article	Title	Authors	Year of publication
Type	Article	Thesis	
Research direction	Empirical		
Context of the research	Age of participants	Sample size	country/region
Methodology	Research design	Statistical analysis	Control group
Findings	The objective of the study	Results/outcome	

Findings

The present systematic review has summarized 12 articles selected through inclusion criteria. The findings showed that WCF had improved learners' writing proficiency in all studies. The purpose of the current study was to find the effects of two types of feedback types, direct WCF and indirect WCF in particular with or without metalinguistic explanation in general. The included studies compared the effects with the control group(no feedback), and all studies involved the treatment process. The instruments and tools have consisted of creative or essay writing, story writing, picture descriptions, and grammar tests (see Table 5). The studies objectify to explore the effects of WCF in general and the difference of effects of two WCF types: direct WCF and indirect WCF. All of the 12 studies showed direct WCF proving effective in the learning process, and a significant difference was found in the effects of direct WCF on writing compared to indirect WCF. However, both feedback types outperformed the control group (no feedback) comparatively. All studies carried out quantitative research methods and quasi-experimental design.

Table 5

Empirical studies summary

Author	Purpose	Feedback type	Instrument/ tools	Method	Findings /out come
Aisha Tanveer, Mehwish Malghani, Durdana Khosa & Maria	To investigate WCF efficacy	direct and indirect metalinguistic explanation	picture composition	quantitative experimental design	Both feedback types showed improvement than the

Khosa (2018)						control group
MomenYasen M.Amin & Saeid Saadatmanesh (2018)	To explore the effects of feedback types	direct and indirect WCF	paragraph writing	quasi-experimental research.		no significant difference
Elhawwa, Rukmini, Mujiyanto & Sutopo (2019)	To find out the effects of feedback types, gender, and cultural background	Focused and unfocused direct feedback	essay writing	quantitative experimental design		Focused direct feedback was found more effective than unfocused direct feedback
Qi Guo & Jessie Barrot(2019)	To observe the effects of different feedback types	direct feedback and metalinguistic explanation	Picture description	quantitative experimental design		was found more effective than the other type
Nemati et al. (2019)	To investigate the effects of feedback types	Focused direct and indirect feedback	timed/untimed grammatical judgment test, narrative writing	quantitative experimental design		Focused direct feedback showed effective results
Hasan Güner Berkanta, Nuriye Batmaz Dererb, Ozgur Kursad Dererb(2020)	To bring forth effects of different feedback types	Underlined(indirect), coded(direct), uncoded	creative writing	mixed-model		Underlined feedback followed by uncoded types proved effective
Abang Fhaizdhya1 & Collin Jerome (2020)	To expose the effects of feedback types	direct and indirect WCF	COLLEX and COLLMAT CH tests	quasi-experimental design		direct feedback showed better improve

						ment in frequency
Sultan H. Alharbi(2020)	To explore the effects of different feedback types	direct and indirect WCF	essay writing, attitude questionnaire	quantitative experimental design		direct WCF significant than indirect
McGrath (2021)	To find out which WCF type is comparatively better	direct and indirect	essay writing	quantitative experimental design		direct feedback effective improved writing performance better than indirect
H. Bozorgian & A. Yazdani (2021)	To investigate WCF efficacy	direct and indirect with metalinguistic explanation	The language aptitude test, speeded dictation, writing task, narrative tasks	quantitative experimental design		The study favored direct feedback
Sonam Zangpo Sherpa(2021)	To look for effective feedback type	direct and indirect	Narrative essay writing	quantitative experimental design		direct feedback is better than indirect
Soulmaz Khodadadi(2021)	To look for effective WCF type	direct and indirect	sentence completion exercises (SCE)	quantitative experimental design		direct feedback proved effective

The sample size of the included studies ranged from 30 to 128 students overall, ranging from 13 to 22 years. Junior high school till intermediate level or the start of the university is when learners need to have good command over targeted language since they have to pay more attention to their selected subjects of future interest. Out of total number of selected studies, 2 articles employed only female participants, 1 study employed only male and rest of the studies included both male and female participants (see Table 6). However the findings did not show any difference in results because of gender.

Table 6

Participants' characteristics

Studies	Sample size	Age	Level	Gender
Aisha Tanveer, Mehwish Malghani, Durdana Khosa & Maria Khosa (2018)	30	15-17	low-intermediate	male/female
Momen Yaseen M.Amin & Saeid Saadatmanesh (2018)	21	16-18	low-intermediate	male
Elhawwa, Rukmini, Mujiyanto & Sutopo (2019)	128	16-18	Intermediate	male/female
Qi Guo & Jessie S. Barrot (2019)	75	20-22	University level	male/female
Nemati et al. (2019)	87	16-18	low-intermediate	male/female
Hasan Güner Berkanta, Nuriye Batmaz Dererb, Ozgur Kursad Dererb (2020)	27	13-14	junior school high	male/female
Abang Fhaeizdhyall & Collin Jerome (2020)	92	20-22	University level	male/female
Sultan H. Alharbi (2020)	60	18-20	undergraduate	male/female
McGrath (2021)	30	20-21	undergraduate	male/female
H. Bozorgian & A. Yazdani (2021)	57	15-18	Intermediate	female
Sonam Zangpo Sherpa (2021)	45	13-14	junior school high	male/female
Soulmaz Khodadadi (2021)	83	14-16	pre-intermediate level	female

Discussion in relation to grounded theory built by the findings

Under the summary of the included articles, a grounded theory has been built on understanding the WCF mechanism from teachers' and students' perspectives. (see Figure 1)

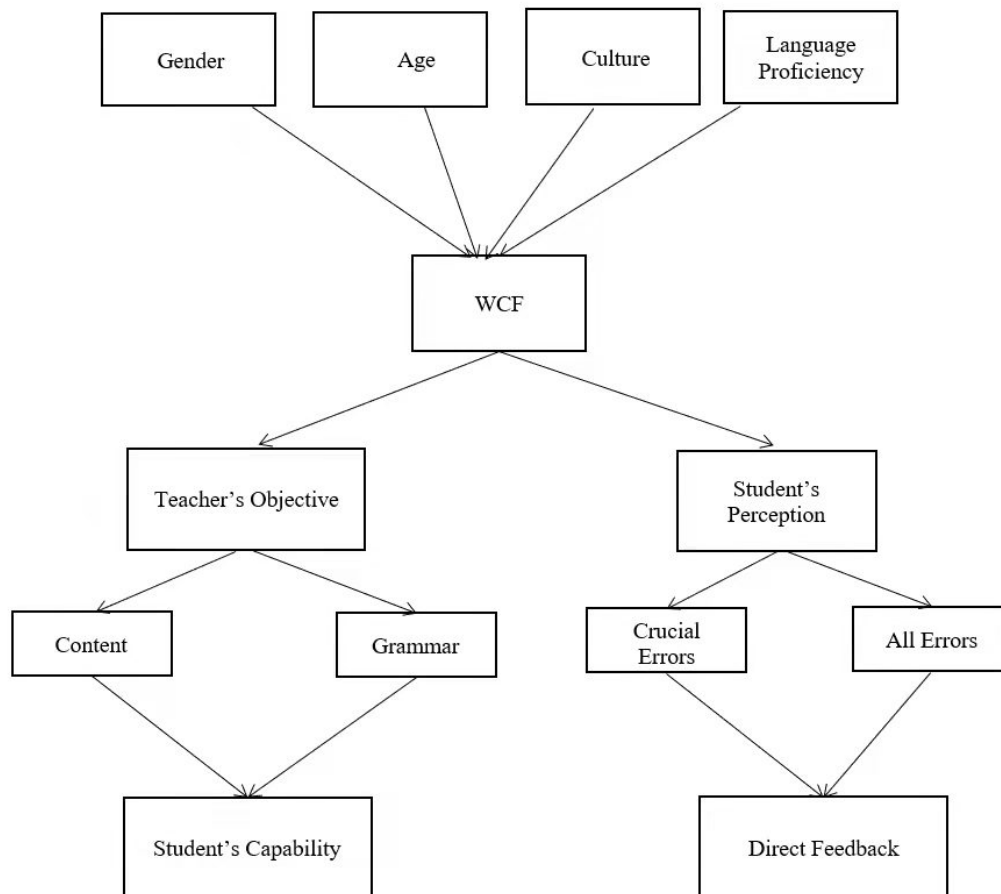


Figure 1. Grounded theory built by the summary of included studies

The need for WCF is affected by factors or individual differences such as gender, age, culture, language proficiency. Since WCF is the two-sided process that belongs to teachers and students, that are connected by two aspects; the teacher's objective of WCF and student's preferences of WCF. For sure, the teacher's purpose of WCF is to improvise learners' grammatical accuracy or language content, whereas some studies have shown students do like all errors to be checked; on the other hand, some prefer certain types of errors to be assessed. Both ways, the learner's preferred feedback type in most of the studies has been direct WCF. On the other side, teachers' objective of providing feedback goes along with students' capability of adapting the provided feedback. It is claimed that direct written corrective feedback is less ambiguous for learners as it provides corrections of their errors with indicating where they have

made the. Ultimately it saves them from hampering the comprehension of feedback another way around, Zheng and Yu,(2018). Direct written corrective feedback also helps provide immediate scrutiny to learners' concept of L2 usage, resulting from finding out correct possible forms of errors (Bitchner & Knock (2010b).

Conclusion

The present study aligns with the studies that show that most learners prefer direct written corrective feedback and favor their teachers to provide them with proper feedback as a learning and corrections tool. Most recent studies have shown clear preference and choice of feedback type. It can also be seen that low intermediate level learners prefer direct feedback to high achievers. However, there is also evidence of studies where participants preferred indirect WCF by their teachers as an indicator of errors to learn and find out the correct version themselves. This way, learners may get the opportunity to be active learners and correct their errors. The studies showed learners prefer to get clues about errors instead of corrections are Chandler (2003), Ferris (2003), Amrhein & Nassaji (2010), Eslami (2014), Hosseiny (2014), Iswandari (2016), Li & He (2017), Trabelsi (2019). These studies found that learners preferred to get their errors and mistakes circles or underlines without corrections by their teachers to search for the corrections themselves and learn by themselves. Keeping learners' personality differences and diverse language capabilities, it can also be stated that most students prefer to get corrected rather than to explain their errors for learning faster. Teachers must understand how their students need to be provided feedback because feedback understood by students is more important than just providing feedback for the sake of checking. Research designs of studies conducted in the area also matter while composing the findings, such as L2 researchers have attempted to look for effect difference on revisions as treatment process whereas SLA researchers have used new writings to check the effects of feedback types in their studies. Ferris (2010) suggested a way to handle this shortcoming of the research designs being utilized. She proposed mixed methods and designs by using both revisions and new writings during treatments. There are many factors and loose ends in terms of feedback systems in schools and institutions where the number of students exceeds.

Future directions

Written corrective feedback as a vast field for research has always attracted attention; still, there is much room to investigate, and many suggestions and considerations can be presented. Overall the research evidence included in the present review focused chiefly on improving learners' grammatical accuracy and linguistic features of the target language. There are so many other aspects that can be well investigated as they are pretty involved in the language learning process. Many features of individual differences such as working memory, willingness to learn, language anxiety, and learner's attitude can be focused on while exploring WCF types and effects. Many researchers have conducted studies to find out the relationship of written corrective

feedback with individual differences, such as Goldstein (2006), Hyland (2011), and Rahimi (2014). Still, it is thought to be so less considering the significance of individual differences over language learning, so more investigation is highly needed. The characteristics and scope of WCF are so vast and complex that most of the research findings ended up with mixed and inconclusive results. The need of the time is to include a variety of dependent and independent variables and involve new research designs. A detailed and careful results compilation, analysis, and wide range of sample sizes with innovative research design would be an immediate solution to solve this mystery (Liu & Brown, 2015).

Moreover, considering the time tenure of empirical studies in this varied field is another essential aspect to indulge. Most of the studies have lasted in few months of investigation involving treatment time. However, it is a dire need to plan research covering a more extended period so that long-lasting effects can be observed over the writing proficiency of learners and more collaborative results can be found.

Furthermore, research sample size can play a significant role in the process and findings of the studies. The studies with a small sample size may cause reliability of results under criticism compared to large sample size and more inclusion of participants. It is suggested to design future studies with large population selection to make results more reliable.

There is also a need to consider learners' language background and proficiency while designing research because some studies showed the effects of students' previous knowledge on research findings (Linck et al., 2013). So more well-designed studies can be planned considering other factors directly or indirectly related to WCF.

In addition to learners' language ability, individual differences, and research methods, some moderators may also influence the findings and results of empirical studies, such as participants' age, gender, and cultural background. These moderators are essential to consider while designing a research study because these moderators are somehow a critical part of learners. All these factors, as mentioned above, and aspects of WCF possess importance and should be considered seriously. Apart from scope, forms, and tones, WCF is also related to peers, friends, and parents except for teachers and instructors. Researchers have been attempting to reach clear evidence about various features of WCF and its effects, whether positive or negative, and more macro-level research is needed.

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