Student engagement with teacher written corrective feedback in EFL writing: A case study of Chinese lower-proficiency students

Yao Zheng\textsuperscript{a,b}, Shulin Yu\textsuperscript{c,\ast}

\textsuperscript{a}Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Room 3017, E33, Av. da Universidade, Taipa, Macau, China
\textsuperscript{b}School of Foreign Languages, Yangtze Normal University, China
\textsuperscript{c}Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Room 3007, E33, Av. da Universidade, Taipa, Macau, China

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

While recent research on teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) has highlighted the importance of students’ engagement with WCF for understanding its effectiveness, little research has investigated lower-proficiency (LP) students’ engagement with WCF in EFL writing classes. Underpinned by a multi-dimensional conceptual framework of student engagement with WCF, this case study has explored how 12 Chinese LP students engaged affectively, behaviourally and cognitively with teacher WCF in EFL writing. It examines data collected from multiple sources, including drafts of student essays, teacher written feedback, student immediate oral reports and semi-structured interviews. The study has found that while the participants’ affective engagement was relatively positive, their behavioural and cognitive engagement was not extensive in a sense that their behavioural engagement did not necessarily result in greater language accuracy, and there was scant awareness at the level of understanding the WCF, especially for the indirect WCF. It has also found that students’ lower English proficiency may negatively influence their cognitive and behavioural engagement with WCF and cause imbalances among the three sub-dimensions of engagement. The findings contribute to an understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of EFL lower-proficiency students’ engagement with teacher WCF.

\section{Introduction}

Written corrective feedback (WCF), also known as error or grammar correction (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012), has been extensively studied and hotly debated over the past two decades in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language (L2) writing (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016). Substantial work has been done in theoretical discussions, empirical studies and pedagogical investigations since Truscott’s (1996) landmark article which claimed that error correction is ineffective in L2 writing and should be abandoned. Although findings on the effectiveness of WCF are so far inconclusive (e.g., Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Lee, 2014; Mawlawi-Diab, 2010, 2011, 2015), it is clear that for WCF to be helpful in improving language accuracy, students should respond or attend to the WCF.

For L2 writing teachers, since providing WCF on students’ written work is a ubiquitous pedagogical practice, understanding how and to what extent students respond to the WCF can be important. It helps them to build links that connect the provision WCF and its effects on students’ writing development. Teachers’ pedagogical practices in providing WCF can be informed by a thorough understanding of student engagement. Moreover, as the recipients of instructions, students play a crucial role in their own learning.
achievements and hence should not be just passive receivers of WCF. There is growing evidence of the close relevance of student engagement to student achievement and learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kahu, 2013; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010).

Cognizant of the importance of student engagement in investigating WCF, several recent studies have explored how average and more advanced English as a foreign language (EFL) students engage with corrective feedback (e.g. Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang, 2017). While the extent to which students engage with WCF may be influenced by many factors, language proficiency might have a role to play both in mediating engagement and in affecting the outcome of engagement, such as students' revised texts. However, little is known about how lower-proficiency (LP) students engage affectively, behaviourally and cognitively with WCF and how language proficiency could influence student engagement. It should be noted that compared with more advanced students, LP students are handicapped more by a lack of linguistic competence than a lack of composing competence and hence need more language-focused instructions of the writing teacher (K. Hyland, 2003). To help teachers provide more effective language-focused instructions based on student response, there is a need to understand how LP students engage with teacher WCF that focuses on language accuracy.

This article reports a case study that has explored the engagement of LF students with their teacher’s WCF in a specific EFL classroom setting. Participants were 12 students from two English writing classes taught by the same teacher at a Chinese university. The study contributes to an understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of less proficient Chinese students’ engagement with WCF and the role of language proficiency in influencing students’ affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement with WCF.

2. Literature review

2.1. Student engagement with CF

Student engagement with corrective feedback (CF) has been interpreted in previous research as learner perceptions (Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2004), revision behaviours (Ferris, 2006; F. Hyland, 2003), processing and uptake (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010), and addressing feedback using strategies and self-monitoring (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013). Ellis (2010) has defined the concept in a broad sense that student engagement with CF refers to students’ response to the CF. He has further observed that student engagement with CF, written and oral alike, can be examined from three perspectives: affective, behavioural and cognitive. The affective perspective regards how students respond attitudinally to feedback. The behavioural perspective concerns how and whether students revise their texts in response to feedback. The cognitive perspective investigates how students cognitively attend to feedback (see 2.2 for a detailed explanation of these constructs). Han and Hyland (2015) have stated that a student’s engagement with WCF includes his/her affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement with the WCF. Zhang (2017) has viewed a student’s engagement with computer-generated CF as manifested in the emotional (similar to affective), behavioural, and cognitive aspects. Taken together, in recent research student engagement with CF has been viewed as a multifaceted continuum and operationalized into three dimensions: affective, behavioural, and cognitive.

2.2. Conceptual framework for student engagement with teacher WCF

In line with the previous research (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang, 2017), we view a student’s engagement with teacher WCF as his/her response to the WCF obtained from the teacher and the engagement is manifested in the perspectives of affection, behaviour, and cognition. In this sense, student engagement with teacher WCF is a “meta-construct” and the three dimensions of affective, behavioural, and cognitive engagement are interrelated under the overarching construct. Fig. 1 is the conceptual framework for student engagement with teacher WCF.

Specifically, affective engagement is considered equal to a student’s attitude (Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang, 2017), which is manifested in his/her affect, judgement and appreciation (Martin & Rose, 2002; Mahfoodh, 2017). Ellis (2010) has made it clear that regarding the affective perspective, student engagement can be examined by focusing on how learners respond attitudinally.

![Fig. 1. The conceptual framework for student engagement with teacher WCF.](image-url)
to the feedback received. Martin and Rose (2002) have stated that attitudinal response includes three main types: affect (to express emotion), judgement (to judge character), and appreciation (to value the worth of things or people). Accordingly, we refer to students’ feelings and emotions expressed upon receiving WCF in conjunction with changes in these feelings and emotions when revising text as the affect; personal judgements of admiration/criticism as well as moral judgements of praise/condemnation towards WCF as the judgement; and valuing the worth of teacher WCF as the appreciation. They are sub-constructs under the affective dimension of student engagement with teacher WCF.

Behavioural engagement with teacher WCF refers to what students do with the WCF received from the teacher. A number of studies have investigated how students handle the feedback (Ellis, 2010), focusing on how they incorporate WCF in revising their work (Ferris, 2006; F. Hyland, 2003) and how they use strategies to revise the work (Ferris et al., 2013). For example, F. Hyland (2003) studied student revision operations by comparing students’ original texts and revised texts in response to WCF. Textual changes were identified to indicate behavioural engagement. Ferris et al. (2013) used interviews to explore students editing strategies and strategies observed to apply previously learned linguistic rules in revision operations. Their focus was on those strategies that guided revision and had a manifestation in student behaviours.

Cognitive engagement is considered as the cognitive investment in processing WCF (Ellis, 2010), manifested in the depth of processing of WCF, cognitive and meta-cognitive operations in processing WCF and making revisions (Han & Hyland, 2015). Specifically, students’ awareness of the WCF indicates the depth of processing WCF, which can be at the level of noticing or understanding the WCF (Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007). Cognitive operations are important indications of students’ cognitive engagement because in responding to the WCF students need to spend mental effort in considering questions such as how and to what extent their texts should be revised, as well as how the revision operations should take place (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). At the metacognitive level, how students monitor and regulate their mental effort to process WCF is also a manifestation of cognitive engagement with that WCF (Ferris et al., 2013).

2.3. Empirical studies on student engagement with WCF

Empirical research using a multi-dimensional perspective to explore student engagement with WCF in L2 writing is still in its infancy. Han and Hyland (2015) examined the engagement of four average college students with WCF through qualitative enquiry. They found that the students’ beliefs and learning experiences together with the interactional context of receiving and processing WCF could lead to individual differences in engagement. Zhang (2017) in a case study explored one university student’s engagement with computer-generated CF on her writing. He found that although the participant’s overall behavioural pattern was unclear, her cognitive engagement was relatively positive and emotional engagement seemed to be affected by the writing scores. The computer-generated feedback was likely to enhance EFL writing but this depended on the student’s engagement. Mahfoodh (2017) in examining how students’ emotional responses towards WCF influenced their text revisions found that emotional responses like surprise, happiness, dissatisfaction and frustration can affect learners’ understanding and uptake of WCF.

While these studies have provided some insights into our understanding of students’ engagement, no research to our knowledge has studied the engagement of LP students with WCF. It is possible that students, regardless of their language proficiency, would engage with the feedback to some extent, but whether the outcome of such engagement (e.g. their revised texts) is successful may largely depend on their proficiency level. Since language proficiency could have a role to play in mediating engagement and hence influence its outcome, it is valuable to investigate students with different levels of language proficiency. However, we still know little about how LP students engage with teacher WCF while more advanced students have been examined in the existing literature. Moreover, LP students are handicapped more by a lack of linguistic competence than a lack of composing competence and hence need more language-focused instructions (Hyland, 2003; Ishikawa, 1995). More knowledge about their engagement is needed to inform teacher WCF practice and hence better address these students’ language learning needs.

To narrow the research gap, the study reported in this article has used the conceptual framework in Section 2.2 to unpack how 12 LP students engaged with their teacher’s WCF in China. This is a classroom-based study in which students were observed in their natural classroom setting without any manipulation or intervention by the researchers. It is designed to triangulate the three facets of student engagement using a qualitative approach and is guided by the following research question: How did the Chinese EFL lower-proficiency students engage affectively, behaviourally, and cognitively with teacher WCF on their writing?

3. Methods

3.1. Context and participants

The study took place at a Chinese teaching-oriented university and focused on two classes of undergraduates in an English writing course taught by the same teacher. There were 30 students aged between 18 and 20 in each class. As required by the university’s syllabus, the students had to attend two semesters of the course throughout their second academic year. In each semester, the class met for 1 h and 20 min each week for 17 weeks. Ying (a pseudonym), the English writing teacher, was invited to participate in this study. As a non-native speaker of English holding a Master’s Degree in English Linguistics, she had received workplace training on language pedagogy and taught the writing course for six consecutive years at the university. She gave her students a topic on which they were supposed to write a 200-word essay every two weeks. Ying viewed providing WCF on students’ work as the norm in teaching writing and was dedicated to the practice. Her classes provided an appropriate setting to address the research questions, as she encouraged multiple drafts, revision and collaboration on written work, and paid much attention to language, particularly
grammar issues. In her classes, students followed a feedback–revision cycle, consisting of composing a draft, receiving teacher WCF, and then completing a revised draft.

Twelve female participants from Ying’s two classes (six students from each) were recruited based on their language proficiency, willingness to participate, and teacher recommendations. To decide their language proficiency, we first looked at their results of college entrance examinations. Their scores for the subject of English showed that they had just passed the threshold level set by the university. Additionally, the course results of previous semesters indicated their LP status in the classes. The teacher also confirmed that they tended to make more grammatical errors in writing than others.

3.2. Data collection

Data triangulation was included in the research design. Data sources included student texts, teacher on-script WCF, student immediate oral reports, and student interviews. Data collection lasted three weeks and involved six major stages based on the feedback–revision cycle (see Fig. 2). The researchers did not intervene in the class instruction.

In Stage 1, at the beginning of the first week, Ying gave the two classes a writing topic on which all of the students were expected to write an essay. At the end of the week, the classes submitted their first draft to Ying and the student participants submitted an extra copy to the researchers. The essay topic was about whether museum entry should be free or not (see Appendix A for the topic and task prompt). It was selected by the teacher based on its appropriateness for the students, not specially designed for the study.

In Stage 2, teacher WCF was provided on each individual text and photocopies of the student participants’ texts with the WCF were collected. In Stage 3, at the beginning of the second week, the classes received their original text with teacher on-script WCF. The student participants recorded their immediate oral report upon receipt of the feedback and then submitted the recording to the researchers. The immediate oral report (in Mandarin Chinese) was used to record the participants’ affective and cognitive responses towards the WCF. They were prompted to say whatever came to mind as they read the WCF and recorded it with a digital recorder. The content beyond the topic of WCF could serve as contextual data (e.g., some participants talked about their language learning experience). The WCF-related content helped us to identify the cognitive and affective aspects of the student engagement, especially the students’ feelings and emotions (affect) and understanding of the WCF (depth of processing).

In Stage 4, during the second week, the classes revised their text in response to the WCF. In Stage 5, at the end of the second week, the classes submitted their second draft to Ying and the student participants submitted an extra copy to the researchers.

In Stage 6, during the third week, one-on-one semi-structured interviews (in Mandarin) were carried out with each student participant within three days of receiving their revised drafts. The participants were interviewed for around 30–60 min and all the interviews were audio-recorded. Interview data helped us to reinforce the observations from oral reports and gain further student responses. The guided questions were initially developed according to the conceptual framework and modified based on a primary analysis of the students’ written work together with the teacher’s WCF. We asked the participants about their language learning experience and their understanding of the WCF.

Fig. 2. Data collection procedures.
experience, opinions about writing and teacher WCF, as well as experience of drafting the text, dealing with the WCF, and revising the text (see Appendix B). Photocopies of the drafts and WCF were used as additional prompts during the interviews.

3.3. Data analysis

3.3.1. Analysis of student texts and teacher WCF

Analysis of the student texts and teacher WCF focused on changes from the first draft to the second together with the general patterns of WCF. The examination of textual data aimed to explore students’ revision operations in response to the feedback as an indication of their behavioural engagement. Cognizant of the significant role WCF patterns play in affecting students’ revision behaviours (see Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Ferris, 1995; Hartshorn et al., 2010; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010), specific attention was given to identifying the general patterns of WCF provided in all texts, including how WCF was provided and what errors the WCF aimed to address. We followed Ellis’s (2009) typology of WCF that includes direct, indirect, meta-linguistic, focused/unfocused, electronic WCF, and reformulation.

Altogether, 24 student texts were obtained: 12 original drafts that received teacher WCF and 12 subsequent revised drafts. Both the drafts and teacher WCF were handwritten. Errors were coded based on a scheme adapted from the analytic framework used in Lee (2004) with some amendments (see Appendix C), and the total number of errors in each text was counted.

The analysis of WCF on the first drafts considered the number of its occurrences and the way it was provided. Direct and indirect WCF was focused since other WCF types such as reformulations and meta-linguistic WCF were quite rare. In analysing the second drafts, we catalogued all modifications the students made, whether they were target-like or not. It should be noted that while target-like modification as successful revision indicated student engagement, non-target-like modification also required attention and could not be made if the student was not engaged. Subsequently, all modifications were counted and grouped, either as directly associated with the WCF or as self-edited by the students and showing no direct or implicit association with the WCF.

An additional coder who was a university English teacher with an Australian Master’s Degree in Teaching English as a Second Language was invited to work with us on examining the student drafts and WCF. She and one researcher first coded approximately 17% of the textual data independently (the original and revised drafts of two student participants, together with the teacher’s WCF). The inter-coder agreement was about 76.3% (Cohen’s kappa), with any disagreements being resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. The researcher then proceeded to code the rest of the texts and WCF.

3.3.2. Analysis of oral reports and interview data

Audio recordings of the oral reports and interviews were manually transcribed by the researchers and proofread by a colleague. While the texts indicated the behavioural aspect of student engagement, the report and interview data could show multiple perspectives. Data analysis was conducted based on the conceptual framework for student engagement with WCF (see Section 2.2) in conjunction with identifying evidence that seemed relevant and meaningful for addressing the research questions. In the analysis, we bore in mind Miles and Huberman’s (1994) caution that the researchers must be unbiased and avoid contaminating the data in analysis to achieve reliability. We aimed to subject the report and interview data to thematic analysis via data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing, as Miles and Huberman have suggested. In the initial coding, we completed data reduction by coding only engagement-related information. In the second-level coding, we coded along the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions in conjunction with sub-dimensions for each major dimension. In the third-level coding, we related all participants along the three dimensions. Reexamining through member checking was conducted before drawing conclusion.

4. Findings

Conrad and Goldstein (1999) have cautioned that to understand how students edit their writing in response to teacher feedback, researchers must not only look at the nature of the feedback itself but also investigate the types of problems the students are being asked to respond to. In this section, we first provide an overview of the teacher’s WCF, which shows how it was provided and what it concerned, to better contextualise our later reporting on the general profiles of student engagement.

4.1. General patterns in teacher WCF

Although teacher feedback can take various forms, the feedback provided by our teacher participant was all similar in format. Ying graded the first drafts and gave both content and language feedback on the original texts in red ink, slightly varying her technique according to the type of error. The content feedback mostly took the form of summary endnotes in Chinese because she believed it would be more comprehensible to her students. Almost all error feedback took the form of in-text error corrections and what errors the WCF aimed to address. We followed Ellis’s (2009) typology of WCF that includes direct, indirect, meta-linguistic, focused/unfocused, electronic WCF, and reformulation.

With respect to the provision of WCF, a variety of techniques were used, but the feedback followed certain patterns across the texts. Firstly, textual analysis of Ying’s feedback written on student drafts showed that she selected errors on an ad-hoc basis. She used focused WCF that selected specific error types for correction rather than unfocused WCF that corrected all of the students’ errors. Secondly, Ying tried not to cross out text and scrawl words and phrases because she thought the format of feedback or comments could have a great effect on students’ responses and subsequent revisions. Thirdly, a mixture of direct and indirect feedback was observed in her WCF on all texts. The teacher provided corrections on some errors, but for others she only advised that an error had
Fig. 3. Example 1: An original copy of teacher WCF on the first draft.

Translation of the Chinese comments: “The textual organisation is not very clear. There are some contradictions in the body paragraphs. Your ideas seem to be unclear. Please pay more attention to grammar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WCF type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>75 (65.22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>40 (34.78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
been made and the student was left to solve it. Table 1 shows the results of further text analysis that found the majority of teacher WCF was given in a direct way (65.22%) and the percentage of indirect feedback was minor (34.78%). Fourthly, Ying was more attentive to errors in some specific linguistic domains, such as the use of the English article system and prepositions. She used the method of underlining the error in conjunction with providing the correct form more frequently than others. When what the student tried to convey was unclear because of ungrammatical forms or structures, underlining was also used together with the sentence ‘What does this mean?’ in the margin as indirect WCF. This kind of indirect WCF occurred quite frequently in the teacher’s feedback: on 7 of the 12 drafts.

4.2. Student engagement with WCF

4.2.1. Affective engagement

According to our conceptual framework, affective engagement can be explored by looking at students’ affect, judgement and appreciation. Affect concerns the feelings and emotions students express when receiving WCF and changes in these feelings and emotions in making revisions. In our study, there was no indication in any of the cases that students were expecting their teacher not to provide WCF. Every student was willing to receive WCF, but the willingness varied in degree for some students thought teacher WCF was indispensable in learning writing and some perceived it as optional. One student (Wen) remarked in the interview:

I am always expecting some kind of feedback from the teacher. If there is some feedback, it indicates that my teacher has read my assignment. I would feel my effort has been acknowledged whether her feedback is positive or not. It is much better than providing us nothing but a grade.

Ten students responded positively upon receiving the feedback, appreciating the teacher’s effort in marking their writing. Interestingly, two students showed slightly different attitudes, expressing discouragement in their oral reports. They said that although the teacher had marked similar errors in their previous essays, they failed to avoid them in the current assignment. The perception that they were not making any progress made them feel frustrated, but when asked how their teacher could better help them with grammar, they were unable to articulate a solution. One student (Yu) stated in the immediate report:

I know my grammar is very poor. I am not quite sure about the usage of different clauses, but I have to use some clauses to enhance sentence complexity and get a better grade. My teacher had corrected similar errors concerning clauses in the previous assignments, but I still made some this time. My grammar is still not good.

Another sub-dimension of affective engagement is a student’s judgement about WCF that includes his/her personal judgement of admiration or criticism and moral judgement of praise or condemnation towards the WCF. Eleven students spoke highly of the worth of WCF and stated they felt upset when WCF was absent. However, 10 students acknowledged that even though the current approach of providing WCF was working well, it would be better if the teacher could provide more consultative support. More opportunities for teacher–student writing conferences should exist, allowing the students to ask questions face to face and receive verbal feedback.

Regarding appreciation of the teacher WCF, in 11 cases, admiration and praise for the teacher’s feedback were expressed straightforwardly. One student’s (Yanwen) comment in the interview seemed to sum up the opinions of the majority:

I know my teacher is very busy, so I am grateful for her time and effort in responding to our essays. I am comfortable with the approach she uses to provide feedback. She has been doing this for nearly two semesters and now I am quite used to it.

They also described the teacher as helpful and dedicated to her work. Five students mentioned that the amount of WCF could be an indication of how their efforts had been received by the teacher.

4.2.2. Behavioural engagement

A student’s behavioural engagement with WCF can be displayed in his/her methods of revision and observable strategies used in revision. Changes in error rates over drafts and students’ textual modifications indicated how they had operated in revising their work. The first and second drafts were marked and analysed for all instances of errors (see Appendix C for the categories). Table 2 shows the results. Although the assignment requested an essay of around 200 words, it did not yield texts of exactly the same length. This situation is frequently encountered in writing research. Following previous research (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Han & Hyland, 2015), a measure of errors per 100 words was calculated to control for differences in text length (total number of errors/total number of words × 100).

The textual examinations also indicated that all of the student participants made modifications, mainly at the word level, but some were non-target-like. Only three students (Haixia, Yulu and Yanwen) attended to all of their teacher’s WCF. Of interest, four students did not make any self-edits at all and six students only made one. Except for the case of Yu in which more self-editing was performed, modifications directly associated with WCF outnumbered self-edited revisions in all cases. One possible explanation for this can be the depth of processing WCF, which mainly remained at the noticing level rather than fully understanding the WCF. The interviews provided more insights in this regard.

Successful modifications were found to be more associated with direct WCF than indirect WCF. Just as Chandler (2003, p. 267) has claimed, ‘direct correction is best for producing accurate revisions, and students prefer it because it is the fastest and easiest way for them as well as the fastest way for teachers over several drafts’. On the other hand, responding to indirect WCF could be more demanding for the students because it may require more cognitive engagement in processing the WCF and a higher level of linguistic competence to self-edit (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Chandler, 2003).
The students used some strategies that can be observed in their behaviours to improve the accuracy of their drafts and their English language competence, which also showed their behavioural engagement with WCF. In the interviews, eight students reported that when revising their essays, they first looked at the words or phrases that had received WCF and then proceeded to read through the text. Some corrections, as the students said, were made according to what seemed to be right in Chinese translation. One student (Jingjing) shared her experience of writing and revision in the interview:

When writing my first draft, I planned the text in my mind first in Chinese and then translated the sentences into English. My teacher said some sentences were not native-like, but they were all right to me. At least they were understandable if we translated them back to Chinese. So, I only revised what I found wrong.

With respect to seeking extra assistance as a revision strategy, only three students described consulting the Internet, peers or other instructors while writing or editing. Only two students said they would go to the teacher and consult about their problems while revising. The main excuses were that there was little time to ask questions in the class and that the teacher would be too busy to deal with their problems individually.

4.2.3. Cognitive engagement

The extent to which a student engages cognitively with WCF can be examined in light of how deep he/she processes the WCF (noticing or understanding), deploys cognitive operations to process the feedback and take revisions, in conjunction with meta-cognitive operations that regulate his/her mental effort in processing WCF and revising texts. Regarding the depth of processing, the immediate oral reports suggested that the students had difficulties in understanding their teacher’s feedback. Confusion about what the teacher intended to convey through indirect WCF was expressed in five reports. Example 2 (Fig. 4) below is an original copy of teacher WCF to one student (Yu) who reported in the interview:

I was stuck at where the teacher underlined a sentence and put a question mark in the margin. I guessed it meant there was an error or some errors in the sentence, but I could not decide where exactly it was. So, I did not make any modifications to that sentence in my second draft.

For another instance, one student (Yanan) who mentioned her confusion about one instance of indirect WCF in the immediate oral report chose to remove the marked sentence in her second draft without asking the teacher what was wrong. The teacher underlined “which can improve” in Example 3 below to indicate the absence of the clause’s antecedent. However, when asked in the interview about why she thought the teacher gave such feedback, the student could not provide any explanation. “That is why I removed the whole sentence in the second draft,” she responded.

Example 3. An example of teacher WCF to Yana

For one thing, which can improve the quality of most citizens, broaden their minds, open their horizons

Surprisingly, in interviews, no student remarked that she could fully understand the WCF despite having noticed the WCF. Particularly, feedback on word choice errors was not adequately understood, even in some instances where the correct word or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student name</th>
<th>Original drafts</th>
<th>Revised drafts</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Error rate</td>
<td>WCF received</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanan</td>
<td>12.08</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haixia</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jingjing</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhihan</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yulu</td>
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<td>Xinya</td>
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<td>Yanwen</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hongyan</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donglin</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

All names are pseudonyms.

Fig. 4. Example 2: An original example of teacher WCF to Yu.
phrase had been given. The students tended to literally translate Chinese into English with little consideration of its appropriateness in the target language, which indicated their unsophisticated command of vocabulary and their inadequate knowledge of context. In processing the WCF, it seemed that the students conducted few meta-cognitive operations to regulate their mental effort. They said that while revising, they simply read through the text in conjunction with the teacher’s feedback and made modifications only when the correct forms were provided or according to what ‘sounded right’ to them when literally translated into Chinese. They tended to deal with individual errors separately, seldom putting them together and referring to meta-linguistic rules. Little mental effort was exerted to create connections among ideas and achieve a greater understanding of the language.

The oral report and interview data showed different levels of cognitive operations among the students, but their cognitive operations were generally limited. Seven students mentioned that they were merely reading the words and phrases that had received WCF and their primary focus in editing was just correcting them. One student (Yulu) commented on her cognitive process in the interview that ‘I think the most effective way of detecting errors is to follow the teacher’s feedback. So, I was scanning for feedback and reading the sentences marked.’ There were cognitive operations deployed, but those were not specific. Two students straightforwardly expressed that in reading the WCF, they were thinking about nothing but trying to locate the errors marked by the teacher: ‘I was looking for the question mark’ (Haixia). Only one student (Wen) said she was trying to figure out what the teacher was thinking in giving the feedback and how to fulfil the teacher’s expectations in her revision:

I thought about what my teacher was thinking when revising my writing. Was she satisfied with my writing or not? Why did she cross out some words? What did she want to tell me by underlining some words? She wrote there is some problem with the sentence structure, so I needed to read the sentence further for revision.

The student thought beyond the WCF and paid attention to her teacher’s intentions. However, probably due to her limited linguistic knowledge, usually she was not able to identify extra errors in her writing when the teacher’s WCF was focused rather than comprehensive.

5. Discussion

This study has uncovered the complexity of LP students’ engagement with teacher WCF and provided new knowledge about the process through which Chinese EFL students with lower English proficiency deal with feedback affectively, behaviourally and cognitively.

From the affective perspective, most participants were quite considerate of their teacher’s workload in providing WCF and their engagement seemed to be overall positive. In the interviews, most of the students expressed appreciation for WCF: eight participants responded that WCF was very helpful, three said it was helpful to some extent and only one (Yu) answered that it was of no use and hence unimportant. Although the majority praised the WCF, tension was found between their expectation that their teacher could provide individual oral feedback and the reality that she had limited time and desire to do so. When receiving WCF and revising their texts in response to the WCF, they seemed to feel frustrated because they were aware of their lower linguistic competence. They realized that they were not making much progress, but could not find a way to improve.

From the behavioural perspective, the LP students’ text revisions as observable outcome of engagement were not all successful, but the students did invest some effort in correcting their errors and modifying the language. In other words, their behavioural engagement did not necessarily result in greater language accuracy. Given their EFL learner status and language proficiency, it was not unexpected that they would make non-target-like revisions, especially when WCF was absent or provided implicitly. Indirect WCF was likely to create obstacles to behavioural processes for less proficient students. A lack of solid linguistic knowledge was related to the students’ failure to detect some errors or find the target forms when their teacher gave indirect WCF or no feedback. This could have also led to unsuccessful revisions. It means our participants’ language proficiency as an individual factor and teacher WCF practices as a contextual factor could have mediated their behavioural engagement that was largely reflected in their unsuccessful revisions. In addition, it was interesting that the self-editing strategies most students used were at the surface level and limited to rereading the text and making corrections according to what seemed right to them. When asked in the interviews why their revisions did not go beyond the sentence level, the students responded that because most of the feedback was on linguistic errors, they were more attentive to these errors. Revisions on ideas and textual organisation were not their focus since the teacher did not emphasise them. The students’ revision behaviours seemed to be considerably influenced by their teacher’s practice.

From the cognitive perspective, although it was not difficult for the LP students to notice the WCF, there was scant awareness at the level of understanding, especially for indirect WCF. A lack of knowledge about the target linguistic forms prevented them from effectively processing the indirect WCF. There were no observable differences in students’ responses towards indirect WCF concerning different types of errors. As Chandler (2003) has suggested, linguistic competence is required for learners to interpret WCF, especially indirect WCF. In the case of direct WCF, students simply notice the correct forms and then transfer them into their revised drafts, but in the case of indirect WCF, students rely on their acquired linguistic competence to self-edit. Accordingly, the inadequate understanding of WCF in the current study could have been attributed to the students’ lack of linguistic competence, which posed them problems in figuring out why the forms or structures marked by the teacher were ungrammatical. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that confusion about what the teacher intended to convey through indirect WCF was expressed in five student oral reports. This finding is not quite surprising since other researchers have also noticed that students sometimes find teacher feedback confusing (e.g. Arndt, 1992; Ferris, 1995). But besides language competence discussed above, our study has also found that the participants’ behavioural engagement seemed to have generated some impact on their understanding of WCF. Since they sought little extra assistance and took superficial strategies in processing the WCF and revising texts, the confusion could not be resolved and there was scant
This study could extend previous investigations on EFL students’ engagement with WCF in two ways. First, the fusion of affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement with WCF provided a rich characterisation of LP students in the EFL writing context. Compared to the average students examined in Han and Hyland (2015), more imbalances among the three perspectives were identified in our participants’ engagement. The imbalances were mainly manifested in the finding that our participants’ affective engagement was relatively positive, but their behavioural and cognitive engagement was not extensive. Their lower language proficiency could be a major cause of this. Due to their limited linguistic knowledge, they could not fully process the WCF cognitively and make further revisions beyond the WCF. Second, the findings from the present study suggest that although student engagement is presumed to be malleable (Fredricks et al., 2004), our participants’ lower language proficiency seemed to hinder the enhancing of their engagement, and thus negatively influence their text revisions and writing development. If the students were not fully engaged with WCF, they were less likely to benefit from it. Similar findings have also been uncovered in Zhang (2017). He argued that computer-generated feedback was likely to positively improve EFL writing but the positive effect largely depended on the students’ engagement with the feedback.

Our research findings can provide three major implications for enhancing LP students’ engagement with teacher WCF. Firstly, to make sure WCF is judiciously provided to LP students, attention should be given to determining the explicitness of WCF. The problems reported by the participants in understanding the WCF (i.e. cognitive engagement), especially when the teacher’s intentions were implicit, suggested that writing teachers need to account for students’ language proficiency when determining how direct or indirect their WCF should be. It is believed that a higher level of explicitness in providing WCF can be more conducive to students’ cognitive engagement (Ferris, 2011).

Secondly, teachers should intentionally explain or clarify their feedback to LP students to reduce confusion and enhance their cognitive engagement. They can do this by increasing the written explanations accompanying their feedback, especially when the feedback is indirect. They can also allow some time in class for students to ask questions about WCF or create opportunities for one-on-one conference, whether with those most in need of them or for small groups of students sharing a common error pattern that the rest of the class does not struggle with.

Thirdly, our findings suggest that teachers should provide their students training on how to respond to WCF affectively, cognitively and behaviourally. Through training, students should be reminded that WCF is provided to their writing with the aim of helping them build awareness of error patterns and skills to self-edit, and eventually avoid these types of errors. This may be helpful for the students’ affective and behavioural engagement. Teachers can also guide students to work in pairs/groups to discuss the WCF received from their teachers. Different from peer feedback, this activity provides students with a chance to examine the received teacher WCF from different perspectives. In this way, students with lower L2 proficiency can get scaffolding from students with higher L2 proficiency and this scaffolding and peer sharing may enhance their cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement.

6. Conclusion

This case study has explored LP students’ engagement with WCF in the Chinese EFL context. Adopting a qualitative approach, it analysed data obtained from 12 university students and their writing teacher to study how these students responded affectively, behaviourally and cognitively to WCF provided by the teacher on their English writing. The results demonstrate the complexity of LP students’ engagement with teacher WCF in EFL writing and indicate that students’ low English proficiency may exert negative influences on their cognitive and behavioural engagement with WCF. Their language proficiency could cause imbalances among the three dimensions of engagement in the sense that students seemed to have relatively positive affective engagement, but they were behaviourally and cognitively engaged at a limited level. It should be noted that their limited behavioural and cognitive engagement was indicated not only in their revised drafts that were observable outcome of the engagement, but also in the oral reports and interviews that monitored how the unsuccessful outcome was generated.

Although every attempt was made to eliminate design and analytical flaws, there were inevitably some limitations to this study, which should be taken into account when further investigation of this topic takes place. First, future research might consider involving students with higher proficiency and compare their engagement with WCF to that of LP students in the same writing context. Moreover, further research is expected to cover more than one feedback–revision cycle in data collection so that more salient patterns of teacher WCF and changes in students’ engagement over time could emerge. Lastly, future enquiry might want to investigate student engagement with teacher feedback on other aspects of writing, such as content and organisation, which could provide insights into the role of student engagement in enhancing students’ writing quality.

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Appendix A

The Writing Topic and Task Prompt

Should museum entry be free? This has been an intensely discussed question for years. The following are the supporters’ and opponents’ opinions. Read carefully the opinions from both sides and write you response in about 200 words, in which you should first summarize briefly the opinions of both sides and give your view on the issue. Marks will be awarded from content relevance,
content sufficiency, organisation and language quality. Failure to follow the above instructions may result in a loss of marks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Museums preserve and display our artistic, social, scientific and political heritage. Everyone should have access to such important cultural resources, which offer educational opportunities to people of every age.</td>
<td>• Free entry could limit the development of museums. Without the revenue from entry fees, museums would not have enough money to collect and preserve cultural objects and hold extra exhibitions of rare pieces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Museums have a valuable role in preserving and transmitting a nation’s history and heritage to new generations. Free access will encourage more people to find out more about their country and help to promote feelings of national unity and identity, while promoting greater understanding and acceptance of foreign cultures.</td>
<td>• If museums are to be funded entirely out of public money, the pressure on any government’s budget from the demands of hospitals, schools, pensions, etc. will inevitably mean that museums will become an under-funded and poorer sector. This will not help our creative industries or tourism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Free access is an investment in the future of this sector of economy and therefore has long-term benefits in securing prosperity for the whole society.</td>
<td>• If museums are entirely funded by the government, they will have little incentive to increase the number of visitors and to make their collections exciting and accessible for all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B. Guide for the Semi-Structure Interview (translated)

1. Guide for the Semi-Structure Interview (translated)

1. Tell me about your learning experiences of English writing.
2. Tell me why you chose the English major.
3. Share with me your experiences in the English writing course so far.
4. In your opinion, what is the role of English writing in English learning?
5. What is the role of language accuracy in English writing?
6. Teachers may give feedback on linguistic errors in your writing. In general, what do you think of teacher feedback on these errors?
7. How do you usually use teacher’s feedback on linguistic errors to revise your draft?
8. What do you do upon receiving the WCF?
9. How do you feel when you receive feedback from your teacher on linguistic errors in your writing?
10. Tell me about your experiences of writing two drafts of this English essay.
11. What kinds of errors have received teacher feedback on your first draft?
12. To what extent did you understand the teacher’s feedback on your errors?
13. Could you explain the teacher’s feedback?
14. What did you do with the linguistic errors in your first draft?
15. Did you use any strategies to revise your essays and/or improve your English language proficiency?
16. What were you thinking about when reading your teacher’s feedback?
17. What were you thinking about when revising your first draft?
18. What do you think of your teacher’s feedback on your linguistic errors in the first draft?
19. Would you like your teacher to change the way she gave you feedback on linguistic errors? Why?
20. Do you have further comments, suggestions, and reflections on teacher feedback on linguistic errors, revisions, or English writing in general?
21. What is your career plan?
22. What kind of role do you think English writing will play in your future career?

Appendix C. Analytic framework of errors in texts adapted from Lee (2004).

(1) Analytic framework of errors in texts adapted from Lee (2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error types</th>
<th>Examples of student error (underlined)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word choice</td>
<td>(1) At the first place...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) For one thing, which can improve the quality of...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>(1) …museum quite important...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Museum supposed to be charged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Punctuation
(1) ...attracting visitors around here, accordingly, free entry...
(2) ...could the young foster a sense of national pride, what's more, history and heritage could...
Verb tense
(1) It is more harmful if museum entry be free than not.
(2) ...and the quality of visiting decreases...
Noun ending
(1) Other support that...
(2) ...will attract more foreigner to visit the museum...
Article
Other
...play the games.
(1) As far as I'm concerned, we should be free the museum entry.
(2) ...a question that should museum entry be free or not.

References


Ms. Yao Zheng is a doctoral student at Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China. She obtained her master degree in National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests focus on second language writing.

Dr. Shulin Yu is Assistant Professor at Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China. He obtained his PhD degree in Education at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include second language writing and second language education. His publications have appeared in Assessing Writing, Language Teaching Research, Language Teaching, TESOL Quarterly, Journal of Education for Teaching, Spanish Journal of Applied Linguistics, Journal of English for Specific Purposes, System, Studies in Higher Education, Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, and Teaching in Higher Education. Email: ShulinYu@umac.mo; Tel.: +853-8822-4647.