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# Writing Instruction and Policies for Written Corrective Feedback in the Basic Language Sequence

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This study presents results of a May 2009 online survey that asked foreign language program directors at U.S. universities about corrective feedback options their teachers use in response to student writing in beginning and intermediate courses. Survey categories included: 1) general information, 2) general written corrective feedback (WCF) policies, 3) specific WCF types applied at different instruction levels, and 4) open-ended commentaries. Results indicate a number of common tendencies: 1) teachers in most programs provide WCF on multiple drafts of student writing; 2) the number of programs with uniform writing policies has been recently increasing; and 3) written feedback on holistic aspects in addition to surface-level error correction is expanding. The study concludes with suggestions for further research and pedagogical applications.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, many second language and foreign language programs have gradually moved away from a strictly product-oriented approach to student writing toward writing as a process. Many education researchers encourage teachers to adopt a dialectic approach combining both process and product (see Nunan, 1988; O'Sullivan, 2007; Warschauer, 2002) and “to support writers through multiple drafts by providing feedback and suggesting revisions during the process of writing itself, rather than at the end of it” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, p. 1). One important component of this approach is the teacher’s written corrective feedback (WCF) provided to help students improve their writing in both redrafting compositions and in writing new ones. Research on WCF in second language and foreign language teaching has generated few recommendations on best practices, yet language teachers and program directors are faced with the day-to-day necessity of making decisions about how to respond to student writing. Questions that need to be answered include, but are not limited to: what specific writing aspects teachers should directly address and what WCF options teachers should use for different proficiency levels.

Indeed, detailed accounts of how teachers and language program directors actually deal with WCF remain scarce. This situation is unfortunate because, as Lee (2011) aptly remarks, “[z]eroing in on the teachers themselves is of paramount importance since they are the deliverers of feedback and agents of change in the classroom” (p. 2). It is especially important to conduct more studies in the Foreign Language (FL) writing context, as this research is extremely limited in comparison to research on writing in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Furthermore, exploring WCF in lower division FL courses is especially urgent in order to clarify policies for graduate teaching assistants and novice instructors to facilitate their training and the implementation of these policies.

This study addresses this research gap by surveying current writing policies in FL programs at multiple U.S. institutions of higher education. It arose from the desire to investigate language program directors’ perspectives on this subject and to explore what WCF options are being used in beginning and intermediate courses. The results and conclusions are drawn from a survey administered to U.S. FL program directors in May 2009. The study is intended to contribute to the dialogue between FL writing researchers and practitioners as well as to help language program directors and coordinators to make informed decisions for improving their FL writing and teacher education programs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Studies Exploring WCF Effectiveness

The effectiveness of WCF has been explored in contemporary scholarship from different angles: impact on short-term learner revisions (e.g., Fathman & Walley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 2006); long-term effects (e.g., Ferris, 2006; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986); and comparison of WCF vs. no feedback as well as of different feedback types (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982). The body of research investigating the impact of WCF on student writing is constantly growing, but the research results remain inconclusive (see, e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Truscott, 2007 for recent reviews). Pedagogical implications suggested by different researchers range from claims that corrective feedback is unhelpful or even harmful for student writing development (Truscott, 1996; 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008; Zamel, 1985) to strong support for WCF practices (Ferris, 1999, 2004, 2006). Studies comparing direct WCF options (when teachers write suggested accurate forms next to highlighted errors) and indirect WCF options (when teachers indicate the location of errors by underlining/circling with or without attaching a metalinguistic error code) end with equally ambiguous results. For example, Ferris (2003) found indirect WCF options to be more beneficial than direct ones, while

Chandler (2003) showed better accuracy improvement rates for direct WCF options, and Robb et al. (1986) found no difference between the two.

Despite these controversial results, there is general agreement that WCF effectiveness is highly context-dependent, and specific feedback types may be beneficial for the development of particular L2 learner writing skills in specific educational contexts (Ellis, 2009). For example, a series of recent publications have come to the uniform conclusion that WCF that targets English definite and indefinite articles has a positive short-term and long-term impact on improvement of writing accuracy for both second language and foreign language learners (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). Direct WCF on English articles with brief and clear metalinguistic explanations was found to be most beneficial for both intermediate and advanced L2 English writers (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010).

Far fewer WCF studies, however, have targeted languages other than English. For example, Lalande (1982) showed that intermediate learners of German that received indirect metalinguistic WCF improved their writing accuracy over the course of a semester more than the group that received direct corrections. Semke (1984), on the other hand, found no difference between more direct vs. more indirect WCF options for a similar student population. Kepner (1991) found no effect for direct WCF given to intermediate learners of Spanish in comparison with a control group, and Mantello's (1997) study revealed no difference between direct and indirect WCF given to immersion high school students of French. In a recent study, Vyatkina (2010) focused on beginning learners of German and also found no difference between direct and indirect WCF options for accuracy improvement in their writing.

A number of recent studies on the subject involved using computers for providing and responding to WCF (see Ware & Warschauer, 2006, for a review). Arnold, Ducate, and Kost (2009) reviewed studies comparing paper-and-pencil and computer-assisted writing revisions and concluded that students make more extensive and more successful revisions while using computers. Sauro (2009) found no difference between direct and indirect WCF provided by teachers in an online chat environment to EFL students, although the indirect group performed marginally better than the control group that received no feedback. Finally, a new line of research has emerged devoted to computer-generated feedback given to students by ILTS (Intelligent Language Tutoring Systems). In a series of publications, Heift (e.g., 2008, 2010) has explored the behavior of beginning and intermediate learners of German in their interaction with the ILTS called the *E-Tutor*.<sup>1</sup> Among other findings, Heift (2010) demonstrated that specific indirect feedback (metalinguistic explanations) is more beneficial than generic feedback for long-term learner development.

## Studies Exploring Current WCF Policies and Their Implementation

Despite mixed results provided by studies exploring the effectiveness of WCF, a number of recommendations for teachers have emerged that are currently widely accepted (see, e.g., Ellis, 2009; Ferris, 2003, 2006; Goldstein, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a). Lee (2008) summarizes the main areas of these recommendations: 1) focus (both global and local, i.e. content and organization as well as grammar and mechanics); 2) error correction (strategic use of direct and indirect feedback with a preference for the latter; selected errors rather than comprehensive correction); and 3) written commentary (text-specific teacher recommendations). The body of research exploring whether and how these recommendations are taken up by teachers in differing contexts remains small but is growing.

### WCF in ESL contexts

One strand of research has explored actual teacher comments made on the margins and at the end of ESL writing pieces. Conrad and Goldstein (1999) investigated the syntactic and pragmatic form of one teacher's comments; Ferris (1997) focused on the length of comment, its functional type, and whether a comment was specific or generic; and Hyland & Hyland (2001; 2006b) analyzed interpersonal and interactional dimensions of teacher prose comments. These studies provide evidence of the shift from providing purely mechanical feedback toward more content-oriented WCF types occurring in the North American college ESL programs. However, Montgomery and Baker (2007) come to a different conclusion after exploring teacher written feedback in an ESL writing program from three perspectives: 1) actual feedback given; 2) teacher self-perceptions; 3) learner perceptions.<sup>2</sup> The results showed that while student and teacher perspectives on the given feedback correlated well, teachers' self-assessment did not reflect the types of feedback that they provided: they believed that they had been giving more global than local feedback which was exactly the opposite of what they were actually doing. The authors concluded that teachers' self-perception reflected the writing policy promoted in their ESL program rather than their actual performance.

### WCF in EFL contexts

There are far fewer studies exploring writing policies and practices in foreign language instruction. For example, Lee (2004, 2008) showed that Hong Kong secondary school EFL teachers tended to correct all surface-level grammar errors following feedback policies established by their institutional administrators. These policies, however, conflicted with those of the national board of education, which recommended more global and selective feedback. Furneaux, Paran, and Fairfax (2007) examined the feedback practices of 110 EFL teachers from five different

countries and found WCF types similar to the ones ascertained by Lee (2004, 2008). Furneaux et al. (2007) conclude that “teachers overwhelmingly focused on grammar in their feedback” (p. 69) instead of focusing on content and primarily used direct corrections while only occasionally using indirect feedback. The differences between primary WCF foci in different educational settings (on mechanical accuracy in EFL settings and on content-related aspects in ESL settings) support Lee’s (2008) conclusion about “the pivotal role context plays in feedback research” (p. 83). In a more recent study, Lee (2010) tracked how EFL teachers’ perspectives on teaching writing and on their own identity as writing teachers changed as a result of self-reflection during an in-service teacher education course. More specifically, the participants changed their perception of teaching writing from mere error correction to the recognition of “the importance of pre-writing input and instructional scaffolding facilitated by genre pedagogy” (p. 152).

### **WCF in foreign languages other than English**

Lefkowitz (2008) analyzed feedback practices of college teachers in foreign and heritage language settings in the US and found that they centered on surface-level error correction. She describes it as a “superheroic quest for accuracy” (as quoted in Cimasko, Reichelt, Im, & Arik, 2009, p. 212), particularly in the case of more advanced heritage language learners. Lefkowitz (2008) attributes this finding to gaps in teacher education, time pressure, and other institutional constraints in FL teaching.

In one of the rare case studies focused on a foreign language other than English, Elola (2008) tracked how a teacher’s beliefs about feedback and revision changed during the implementation of a new writing policy in his intermediate Spanish course at a North American college. The teacher (whose pseudonym is Juan) fully supported the new method, namely the transition “from error correction to revision in addition to just error correction” (Elola, 2008, p. 52). In contrast with findings from earlier research suggesting that teachers prefer to provide feedback on grammar accuracy rather than content-related aspects (e.g., Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996), Juan gave more weight to commenting on textual organization and content rather than on surface-level errors. He perceived that this new approach better prepared students for taking upper-level language courses and was more beneficial to them than the previous approach that targeted five types of grammar errors. Furthermore, Elola (2008) found that Juan used different types of feedback to address content and form: he provided marginal prose comments on content issues and codes for grammar and vocabulary errors based on a system of symbols used in his program. Juan coded only those errors that he thought his students were able to correct on their own based on their background knowledge. Interestingly, the author posited that students successfully corrected most grammatical errors regardless of the accuracy of Juan’s coding, which mirrors the findings of Ferris’s (2006) study of intermediate ESL

learners. Elola (2008) concluded her study by advising teachers to incorporate feedback on content even at earlier stages of language instruction as well as during in-class revision sessions under the teacher's guidance. In a similar fashion, Hyland and Hyland (2006b) pointed out the importance of making the process of giving and receiving feedback as interactive as possible.

The most comprehensive recent study of college level policies on FL writing in general and feedback in particular is O'Donnell (2007). The author reported the results of a 2002 survey of 66 U.S. language program directors (LPDs) of French, German, and Spanish. The target student population was limited to intermediate learners only: more specifically, students enrolled in the last mandatory FL course needed to fulfill the basic language requirement. The survey results showed the importance of writing in these programs: most respondents stated that their programs require four to six writing assignments with an average length of one to two pages. In addition, more than two thirds of the respondents wrote that they require multiple drafts for graded compositions. On the other hand, only about 25% of participants responded that their programs have established policies on the type of WCF that instructors were expected to give to students. Moreover, one third of those respondents said that these policies were not being followed. When asked what WCF types were being used by the instructors, respondents stated that "coding was done more frequently, followed by pointing out errors without additional comments" (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 663). The least used WCF type was making general comments related to grammar (summarizing error patterns). There were no questions about direct WCF types. In addition, many institutions used an error correction code but respondents indicated that instructors used it "with questionable consistency" (p. 663). Although respondents stated that comments on organization and appropriateness were also provided, the author concluded that "[i]nstructors seem to gravitate toward the correction of linguistic mistakes since these types of errors are tangible, concrete, and quantifiable, thus allowing the instructor to comment objectively" (p. 665). O'Donnell (2007) concluded her report by reiterating the need for more dialogue between educators and for a best practices policy related to L2 writing across languages and programs.

### **Literature Review Summary**

To summarize, detailed accounts of how teachers and language program directors actually deal with WCF are rare. Studies situated in FL contexts have been especially scarce as opposed to research on ESL writing. One of the possible reasons for this discrepancy may lie in the difference in the proficiency level of the learners and the relative importance of writing in ESL and FL programs. ESL studies work with students over a much wider range of general language proficiency and writing tasks (often related to academic college-level coursework). Whereas writing expression typically constitutes a considerable portion of ESL course grades, writing

in lower-level FL courses is only one component among many. Additionally, lack of attention in both FL education and research to such aspects as organization, theme knowledge, and real world content knowledge may be explained by an existing (overoptimistic) assumption that learners already have respective writing skills in their first language and, therefore, automatically bring them to the FL writing task. The present study aims to contribute to this field by reporting the results of a survey on WCF policies administered to U.S. foreign language program directors.

## **THE SURVEY**

The survey instrument was developed by the researcher. A number of questions were modeled on O'Donnell's (2007) survey to enable a comparison of the results. Questions related to specific WCF types as well as to computer-assisted feedback were formulated based on the WCF research literature reviewed above. The survey draft was shared with a few colleagues holding language coordinator positions, which led to a revision of the survey for its final version.

The survey included 17 questions relating to four main blocks: I) general information; II) general WCF policies; III) specific WCF types applied at the elementary and intermediate level; IV) open-ended comments (see Appendix). The questions in the first three blocks required either a yes/no or a multiple-choice response with an additional space for open-ended responses where appropriate. The questions in block four were open-ended and solicited free prose responses. Specific survey questions are listed in the Appendix and referenced in the report of the results (as Q1, Q2, etc.).

It should be noted that not all respondents replied to all survey questions, so the reported percentages were calculated on the number of valid responses to each particular item. Although numerical data are reported in this study with the goal of simple counting and comparison, statistical analysis was not performed. The responses were analyzed qualitatively and inductively, and commonly emerging patterns were identified and categorized. The following sections report on the background information about the respondents and survey results.

### **General Information**

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2009. Participants were solicited from the professional listserv of the American Association of University Supervisors and Coordinators (AAUSC) and additional personal email invitations were sent to several language program directors. A total of 30 responses were received and they represented 22 institutions and 9 languages. Languages included German (11), Spanish (8), French (6), Italian (3), Japanese (1), Russian (1), Chinese (1), Catalan (1), and Sanskrit (1).

The questions in survey block I (see Appendix) elicited background information about participating institutions and language programs. This information, although not directly germane to the focus of the survey, is important since program size and duration as well as ranks of instructors reporting to LPDs may have direct influence on their decisions regarding program policies.

### **Program size (Q3, Q4, Q6)**

The participants reported that they typically supervise from 1 to 80 FL instructors (with an average of 17 instructors) each semester (quarter). Not surprisingly, directors of programs that included Spanish had the most instructors under their supervision. Spanish program directors also supervised the largest number of class sections with an average of 38 and a maximum of 85. The second largest programs were French with an average size of 21 class sections with a maximum of 55. Italian and German were reported to be the third largest programs with an average of 13 and 11 sections respectively but not exceeding 18 sections. Other language programs were smaller in size with an average of 1-5 sections. The average section size ranged from 10 to 25 students with an overall average of 18.5 students with a relatively even distribution across languages and institutions.

### **Program duration (Q5)**

The respondents indicated that programs under their supervision varied considerably in duration. The majority (27%) stated that their program included 4 semesters of language study, whereas an equal number of respondents (15.4% each) wrote that their programs lasted 2, 3, and 5 semesters. Two directors supervise six semesters of language study, and three respondents indicated that their programs were divided into quarters (four, six, and nine quarters, respectively). Five respondents reported directing longer language programs with a duration of 7 to 10 semesters. Language programs at their institutions integrate courses beyond the basic sequence required to complete the foreign language requirement and include courses at advanced levels.

### **Instructor rank (Q6)**

All but two directors reported supervising graduate teaching assistants (TAs), 16 directors supervised lecturers, four directors supervised adjunct faculty, and one director supervised regular faculty. In addition, some respondents indicated supervising head teaching assistants who, in turn, coordinate other TAs. Finally, more than a half of the respondents (17) coordinated a combination of instructors at different ranks (e.g., TAs and lecturers or faculty), whereas one third (10) coordinated only TAs.

## RESULTS

### Multiple-Choice Responses

#### *General WCF policies (Q7, 8, 9)*

Question 7 (see Appendix) asked the language coordinators whether their program had a uniform policy about the format of WCF that their instructors were required to give to students. Overall 18 respondents (60%) replied positively and 12 respondents (40%) negatively (see Table 1), however the distribution of these responses did not correspond in any way to the program size. Question 8 asked whether the program directors employed a list of unified error correction codes (e.g., using the symbol SV for subject-verb agreement or L for lexical errors). 16 respondents (53%) answered this question positively and 14 respondents (47%) negatively (Table 1). Interestingly, not all of these responses corresponded to the yes/no answers to the previous question. Table 1 illustrates that five out of 18 programs that had a unified WCF policy did not employ unified error correction codes and three programs out of 12 with no unified policy did have unified code lists.

Uniform policy	Uniform code list	n (out of 30)
x	x	13
-	-	9
x	-	5
-	x	3

*Table 1. Number of programs using uniform WCF policies (Q7) and uniform correction code lists (Q8)*

In response to question 9, most LPDs indicated that a multi-draft approach was used in their programs for writing assignments. Most frequently, WCF is provided for essay/composition writing tasks. 19 program directors (63%) wrote that their students receive WCF for more than one essay/composition draft, five programs providing WCF on three drafts (see Table 2).

1st	2nd	3rd	n (out of 30)
x	x	-	11
x	-	-	6
x	x	x	5
-	-	-	5
-	x	-	2
-	x	x	1

Table 2. Essay / composition drafts on which programs provide WCF (Q9)

### *Specific WCF types (Q10, 11, 12, 13)*

This block included more specific questions about WCF types used in the language programs. In particular, respondents were asked to differentiate their answers according to the course level. Only two levels, elementary and intermediate, were included as suggested response categories. No definition of the levels was given, although it was assumed that each level roughly corresponded to two semesters of language study (see Byrnes, 2009).

Question 10 asked on what aspects of writing the directors requested their instructors to comment and to give feedback. The categories were taken from current FL writing research (e.g., Arnold et al., 2009; Ferris, 2006; O'Donnell, 2007).

Aspects of writing level	Elementary level	Intermediate
content	22	21
structural organization (text level)	17	20
structural organization (sentence level)	24	23
grammatical accuracy	25	24
lexical appropriateness	25	24
punctuation	17	17
spelling	25	24
it is up to the instructor	5	4

*Table 3. Aspects of writing on which WCF is provided (Q10)*

The responses (see Table 3) showed almost no differentiation between the elementary and intermediate proficiency level in regard to writing aspects on which WCF was given. Most respondents require or encourage their instructors to give feedback on all of the following aspects: content, organization, grammatical accuracy, lexical appropriateness, punctuation, and spelling. Almost two thirds of the respondents (19) provide feedback on the same writing aspects for both the elementary and intermediate level. However, four programs reserve comments on the structural organization at the text level for intermediate students only. Finally, one respondent indicated that WCF on all writing aspects was given at the elementary level only and another respondent stated the same for the advanced level only.

Question 11 asked what specific WCF types were recommended to instructors to use at what course level. Based on the published literature, three main WCF types were listed for respondents to choose from and they were defined as follows: direct corrections (underline/circle the error and provide the correct form); coded corrections (underline/circle the error and attach a code from a specified code list); and indirect corrections (underline/circle the error without providing a code or an answer). The responses indicated that in most programs, different combinations of various WCF types are used (see Table 4). Among specific types, coded feedback appeared to be used most frequently; 20 respondents (67%) wrote that they use coded WCF option in their programs. In ten programs (33%) instructors also provide indirect feedback and in eight programs (27%) they provide direct feedback.

coded	indirect	direct	n (out of 27)
x	-	-	11
x	x	-	6
x	-	x	3
-	-	x	2
-	x	x	2
x	x	x	2
-	x	-	1

*Table 4. Combinations of WCF types used (Q11)*

Notably, the responses showed little differentiation between proficiency levels, which mirrors the distribution of responses about WCF categories (cf. Table 3). Namely, selected WCF types appear to be generally applied across levels. There were a few exceptions: two respondents indicated that direct WCF is used for elementary but not intermediate students, one respondent reported the use of indirect feedback only at the elementary level, and one respondent wrote that indirect feedback is used only at the intermediate level. Finally, six program directors indicated that it is up to the individual instructors to choose between WCF types, a result that is similar to the responses about error categories.

Question 12 explored to what extent computers were used for L2 writing in language programs. The first part of the question asked whether students used computers for writing and submitting written assignments. Responses showed that most programs use a combination of computers and “traditional” paper-and pencil writing, with only three programs using paper-and-pencil only (see Table 5). Two respondents added in the open-ended comments section that it is up to the students to decide whether to submit handwritten or typed writing assignments. Table 5 shows that most students type their assignments, and then submit them either as a printed paper copy or electronically. There were virtually no differences between proficiency levels.

by hand	type and print	type and submit electronically	n (out of 23)
-	x	x	8
-	x	-	5
x	x	x	5
x	-	-	3
x	x	-	1
-	-	x	1

*Table 5. Student use of computers for writing assignments (Q12)*

The last multiple-choice question (Q13) related to the use of peer feedback in writing assignments (see Table 6). Ten respondents (33%) indicated that they encourage their instructors to use peer review or peer editing and five of them (17%) stated that it is required (in three programs at the elementary level only, and in one program at the advanced level only). Also, even in programs where peer feedback is encouraged, many program directors (43%) leave the decision up to the individual instructors.

Peer feedback is	Elementary level	Intermediate level	Total responses
required	4	1	5
encouraged	9	10	10
left up to the instructor	12	13	13

*Table 6. Incorporation of peer feedback (Q13)*

## Open-Ended Responses

Most multiple-choice questions included additional open-ended answer space for respondents who wanted to add comments. Furthermore, questions 14-17 were designed for eliciting more extended prose responses from program directors on general principles and specifics of their approach to providing written feedback. This section summarizes these responses according to main thematic threads that were identified and provides representative excerpts from program directors' comments.

*Other WCF aspects and types (Q9, 10, 11, 12)*

As mentioned above, essay/composition turned out to be the writing assignment type on which WCF is most frequently provided (see Table 2). However, eight respondents mentioned other assignment types in open-ended comments to question 9. They stated that their instructors also provide WCF on one or two drafts of other writing assignments such as journal/blog, Wiki, student portfolio, discussion board, final projects, power point documents, or open-ended writing assignments in the electronic workbook.

In open-ended comments to Q10, a few respondents added a number of aspects other than ones mentioned in the survey that their instructors comment on at both proficiency levels. These aspects included both formal aspects (ability to follow directions) and features of higher level textual organization related to discourse-based and genre-based approaches to FL writing. Among the latter, one respondent mentioned expressiveness, voice, character/argument development, genre appropriateness, and creativity, and another respondent listed lexico-grammatical complexity as appropriate to the genre of the writing assignment, audience awareness, and awareness of textual roles. In addition, one respondent included an integrative criterion of task completion. Finally, five program directors indicated that it was up to the individual instructors to decide on what aspects of student writing to comment.

In response to the question about specific WCF types, one respondent wrote that the choice between indirect and coded WCF types depends on the draft. Another respondent commented that WCF is applied only at the advanced level using the indirect option. In addition, two respondents pointed out that only a limited number of selected errors are corrected in each piece of writing. One of these respondents stressed an individualized approach to WCF: “we vary what we ‘correct’ or comment on by assignment and also by individual students’ needs”.

The second part of question 12 asked whether instructors use computers for providing WCF. The answers indicated that two thirds of the instructors (66%) provide feedback by hand on paper copies, whereas one third provide WCF electronically. There is an indication that computer-based WCF is considered even more time-consuming for instructors than hand-written WCF. For example, one respondent commented: “I think going to required use of Microsoft Track Changes would increase the effectiveness, but our Lecturers teach 4 classes per term and I do not feel it would be reasonable to require that given our context”. In one third of the cases, instructors decide themselves whether to use computers for providing feedback or not.

### *Use of peer feedback (Q13)*

In open-ended comments to question 13, one respondent reported arranging pre-writing workshops instead of peer-review sessions and another respondent stated that peer feedback is used for selected assignments depending on the “precise nature of the task”. One additional participant wrote that a three-draft process is used at the advanced level “with the first draft reviewed by a peer group”. Finally, one respondent explained: “I ask instructors not to focus peer work on grammatical or lexical accuracy but rather reader response, e.g., ask for more information about certain characters, ask about the story line, make suggestions for alternative endings”. In other words, peer feedback in this program is reserved for commenting on writing content rather than formal language features.

### *Strategic use of different WCF options (Q14)*

Question 14 asked whether program directors suggest that their instructors use WCF options strategically, e.g., providing direct corrections on grammar aspects not yet learned but codes for errors that learners are expected to be able to correct on their own (see, e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Ferris, 2006). Out of the 24 survey participants who responded to this question, 66% indicated that they use precisely this approach. These program directors pointed out that they promote the policy of making students responsible for correcting structures that “students would be expected to have knowledge about (that is, the students were taught these forms already in the course or in previous prerequisite courses).” For example, one participant provided the following explanation that is representative of this group of responses:

I recommend to the teachers I train that they focus on correcting the errors that students should have been able to avoid. Those errors should be coded and expected to be corrected by the second draft. Errors that are beyond the students' level should be corrected if the error hinders comprehension, otherwise it is to be ignored.

Those program directors who enforce strategic handling of student writing errors by instructors also listed the following helpful techniques: 1) “focus on 2-3 main issues in each student's text”; 2) “summarize patterns of errors on grade sheet”; 3) “encourage students to work with what they already know and not move too far beyond what they've studied”. For example, one respondent described a procedure for using selective, focused feedback: “In intermediate courses, we use a system where the instructor circles 5 errors (different types) and use a minimal code. Students correct errors and provide explanation (with reference to the textbook page) of the error and reason for the correction.” Another participant described an

approach that distinguishes between the two major types of writing assignments (portfolio and journal) with regard to purpose and feedback/assessment principles:

We have a writing rubric for our portfolio assignments and one [criterion] is “Targeted Structures” and one is “General Structures” so they are asked to pay particular attention to the grammar that is targeted in relation to specific assignments. Also we do informal journal writing (online using Blackboard) in which I ask them NOT to correct at all but to provide global WCF (e.g., “you are using the *passé composé* and *imparfait* very accurately!” Or “you need to review the difference between the relative pronouns *qui* and *que* in this text”).

The remaining eight out of 24 respondents replied to the question about strategic use of WCF types negatively. One of them indicated that coded correction was applied across the board, another respondent wrote that it is left up to the individual instructors, and one participant answered the question negatively but expressed interest in trying out a strategic approach to using different feedback types.

### *Correspondence of WCF practices to WCF policies (Q15)*

Question 15 asked about how program directors control whether instructors under their supervision follow their recommendations. Most respondents indicated that they regularly monitor the implementation of WCF practices in their programs. The most frequently used methods included: regular pedagogy roundtables; discussions in methods courses; collaborative correcting and grading of a set of student essays; spot-checks of corrected and commented student essays; and monitoring student midterm and final evaluations. Eight respondents, in contrast, indicated that they do not check the process of giving feedback or do not check it in a systematic fashion. Some program directors described their interaction with instructors as follows: “I don't check on them. Most of them seek me out for help on dealing with student writing” and “it is greatly based on trust”. Finally, one respondent expressed regret about not having a check-up system: “I actually do not check, but probably should”.

### *Satisfaction with existing policies and suggestions for improvement (Q16, 17)*

Question 16 asked program directors whether they were satisfied with their approach to WCF and whether they wanted to change anything, and question 17 asked for any other additional comments. 14 out of 26 participants who responded to question 16 wrote that they were satisfied or mostly satisfied with their current approach, and eight of them did not want to make any changes. For example, one respondent wrote: “I am satisfied with my personal approach to WCF: a coded

grammar correction sheet plus personal commentary on the CONTENT of the student's writing assignment." Those who wanted to implement changes, indicated the following three areas for improvement: 1) introduction and implementation of a uniform writing policy ("I'd like to exert tighter control without imposing"; "I wish I had time to do more spot checking of how teachers use the rubrics, and more repeat[ed] norming sessions throughout the year"); 2) improvement and introduction of uniform coding and grading rubrics ("I also know that it is very hard to use a grading rubric that separates out vocabulary too strongly from grammar, since so many errors at the intermediate level are very closely connected"; "we will be implementing correction codes in the fall to provide more uniform feedback to students and to direct instructors in the right direction regarding types of feedback"; "I wish we had a unit-wide rubric both for grading and for correction codes") and 3) implementation of selective feedback-giving ("I just heard about a new technique from a recent conference on L2 writing: teachers only give this sort of detailed linguistic feedback for a portion of a writing assignment. I liked this idea very much and may try out in some of our classes").

Furthermore, many respondents expressed a wish to shift more weight from formal feedback on surface grammar-related errors to holistic and content-related feedback in their programs. In particular, they would like to "spend more time with TAs on how to give content feedback and also focus more on text structure", "impress on teachers that comments on content are just as important as WCF for grammar", and "get beginning TAs to focus on global assessment of meaning". The following two excerpts provide a good illustration of this more content-based approach that LPDs would like to implement in their programs:

I intend [to] do at least one workshop in the Fall semester on giving content-based feedback on written assignments as this seems to me to be the least invasive way to encourage students to write more. I believe that only by writing will students work out their errors and that feedback should not be based solely on mistakes but also focus on things that students ARE able to do. I would like for my instructors to believe this as well but I know that I've got quite a ways to go before I can say that this is what is happening in our BL [basic language] classrooms.

I wish all instructors would provide more non-grammatical-accuracy-oriented feedback and more positive feedback - but that takes a lot of time so I understand why it doesn't get done as much. I also wish there would be more suggestions re lexical precision, not just accuracy. That's why I ask instructors to provide the correct form (or clause) for students for grammatical accuracy and alternative (more specific, more appropriate) words for lexical precision (not just accuracy). Learners then explain the difference in writing.

## **SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

On a broad scale, responses to this survey demonstrate the importance of writing in the FL programs in American universities, which supports the results of O'Donnell's (2007) survey conducted in 2002. The results of this study also show that LPDs in many programs put considerable weight on commenting on multiple drafts of student writing (which also corroborates O'Donnell's results). However, the responses elicited by this study demonstrate an inherent diversity of university language programs (see also Angell, DuBravac, & Gonglewski, 2008) in handling writing assignments and a lack of uniform WCF policies. From a plethora of local decisions made by different LPDs, a number of common tendencies emerged that are summarized below.

### **Feedback Focus**

The responses suggest that students in the majority of the LPDs' programs receive feedback on various writing aspects including content and appropriateness, on the one hand, and grammatical accuracy and other linguistic aspects, on the other hand. It must be noted that, although the respective survey question (Q10) was modeled on analytical feedback rubrics (e.g., O'Donnell, 2007; Shrum & Glisan, 2010; Terry, 1992) and prompted multi-part responses about separate language aspects, many respondents expressed their conviction that more holistic feedback needs to be provided and gave examples of how they train their teachers to do so. In particular, they pointed out the importance of commenting on more global aspects of writing (e.g., stylistic appropriateness) and not only on mechanical accuracy. These responses were indicative of the understanding that language meaning and form are dialectically interrelated and often hard to separate in feedback. On the other hand, the results show that surface-level error correction remains the focus of attention of many instructors, which confirms findings from studies in all L2 learning contexts: ESL (Montgomery & Baker, 2007), EFL (Furieux et al., 2007), and FL other than English (Lefkowitz, 2008; O'Donnell, 2007).

### **Writing Assignment Types**

The survey question 9 suggested composition/essay and journal/blog as possible assignment types on which WCF is provided but also asked LPDs about other writing tasks that they may assign. The responses show that WCF is most frequently provided on essay/composition type writing assignments, although other types were also named by a few LPDs (see "Open-ended responses" above). The prevalence of the essay/composition in the survey responses may be attributed to the fact that this genre lends itself best to a multi-draft writing approach and, respectively, to analytical WCF. In other words, this prevalence should not necessarily be interpreted as an

indication of the absence of other writing assignment types in LPDs' programs. Most likely, this result indicates a widely spread opinion that other writing tasks do not require a WCF component. The survey did not explicitly elicit information as to whether LPDs promote genre awareness in the writing components of their programs (see Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010), but three respondents noted in their open-ended comments that they either incorporate comments on genre appropriateness into WCF or would like to do so in the future. Additionally, the term "essay/composition" may have masked the fact that actual assignments do vary somewhat by genre (such as writing a letter, a newspaper ad, and the like). For example, one LPD reported that instructors provide feedback on character development, which may indicate that students are assigned to write stories under the guise of the personal essay.

### **Specific WCF Types**

In terms of specific WCF types, most language programs use a mixture of different direct and indirect options with a preference for the latter for the coded WCF option. About two thirds of the LPDs in this study use codes for giving written feedback, which is in line with O'Donnell's (2007) findings from 2002. However, only half of this study's respondents who use this option apply uniform code lists. Furthermore, most programs do not differentiate between types of feedback given at the elementary and at the intermediate level of instruction. Notably, a number of respondents expressed a preference for summary comments on separate sheets rather than as insertions into student texts. They also pointed out the importance of metalinguistic explanations for accuracy corrections. It should be noted that the benefits of including clear and concise metalinguistic feedback have been confirmed in a number of recent studies of WCF effectiveness (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Heift, 2010).

The survey respondents strongly support differentiating WCF types and using them strategically. In particular, most LPDs agree that although coded indirect feedback is valuable because it promotes student independent thinking and self-revision, it should be applied only to errors that students can be expected to self-correct based on their current L2 development stage. For other cases, such as selecting more context-appropriate words or grammatical constructions, direct suggestions by the instructor seem more beneficial. Next, respondents repeatedly recommended providing selective rather than comprehensive WCF.

Answers about preferences for paper-and-pencil and computer-based writing approaches revealed mixed results. Whereas students submit their writing assignments both electronically and on paper (no distinct preference for either medium was found), two thirds of the instructors still prefer to provide their WCF on paper copies of student writing.

## Feedback and Assessment

This survey focused on feedback policies and did not ask questions about grading and assessment. There were a few responses, however, which indicated a conflation of feedback and assessment on the part of the LPDs. For example, one respondent commented on the “criterion-based system that rewards risk-taking in compositions - not a subtractive system that reduces grades based on number of mistakes”. Three more respondents commented on how they ensure grading consistency among instructors during “norming sessions”. Although feedback and assessment are undoubtedly interrelated pedagogical issues (e.g., grading sheets for an assignment may also contain feedback comments with suggestions for improvement), their purposes clearly differ: the former is intended to help learners in their L2 development, whereas the latter contains judgment and may fulfill a gatekeeping function. It is possible that this recurring confusion is reinforced by widely used teacher education textbooks, which sometimes intersperse discussions of feedback with references to grading options.<sup>3</sup>

## WCF Policies and FL Writing Programs

Whereas many language program directors implement uniform guiding policies for managing writing assignments and strategically choosing among feedback options, many other programs do not have such policies. In the latter programs, it is up to the instructors to choose what writing aspects to comment on, what WCF types to use and whether to use peer feedback. This puts the burden of making decisions onto individual instructors, which may lead to disparities in both the instructional process and grading within a program. Many respondents to this survey expressed a wish to develop a uniform WCF policy in their programs that would be both efficient and effective. Finally, a number of respondents acknowledged the value of peer feedback but no common trends in using this feedback option are discernable. Most LPDs recommend peer feedback sessions but, ultimately, instructors decide whether and when to include them into a multi-draft writing process.

Open-ended responses also contained a number of valuable suggestions for improving the management and coordination of FL writing programs. LPDs suggested 1) developing and using specific feedback rubrics for different writing assignments (addressing both content and form); 2) having at least one program-wide meeting at the beginning of each academic year to discuss general writing policies; 3) performing periodic WCF spot-checks and practice sessions for instructors at each level; 4) learning about recent developments in WCF research and conveying this information to instructors in the methodology courses and during coordination meetings.

These responses are indicative of a general agreement on the part of LPDs that WCF policies are but one aspect of the broader issue of teaching writing in particular and teacher education in general. The following open-ended comment reflects the fact that respondents felt restricted by the rather narrow WCF focus of the survey and wanted to express their ideas about how to approach writing in their FL programs:

I also wish that instructors would guide students more with planning their writing, teach them how to revise, to solicit audience input, etc. - and take writing more seriously (many students complete their assignments the night before they are due). I think WCF should be secondary - it sort of comes too late and is inefficient. A good part of [WCF] concerns forms that students already “know” but didn't think of at the time - so marking anything up will only remind students of what they know (and didn't do) - and not contribute to true learning. They'll make similar mistakes on the next assignment. It also does not highlight that there are many different ways to say something - which are more or less appropriate to a genre, for a specific audience. WCF makes it seem like writing is about “getting \*it\* (whatever “it” is) right”- in seemingly absolute terms.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM COORDINATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has documented how foreign language program directors describe their written corrective feedback policies and thus contributed to “developing empirical models of second-language writing instruction that do justice to the full nature of this phenomenon” (Cumming, 2001, p. 209). Moreover, it provided LPDs an opportunity “to share insights, experiences, and tools across universities, particularly as many are solely responsible for graduate student professional development in their department” (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010, p. 389).

### **Need for Continuing Discussion**

The survey results showed that there is much need for continuing discussion about WCF practices among LPDs in particular and between FL writing practitioners and researchers in general. It supports Ellis's (2009) call for teachers' self-reflection because “reflecting on [corrective feedback] serves as a basis both for evaluating and perhaps changing existing [corrective feedback] practices and, more broadly, for developing teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves” (p. 15). Many respondents to this survey expressed a strong interest in the survey results and a wish to improve and systematize their FL writing policies. Less experienced program directors shared their uncertainty about “how much WCF is appropriate to promote learning to students at the two principal levels (elementary, intermediate)”

and about the best methods of training instructors under their supervision. The following comment appears to express the general concern of many language program directors:

I would like to take a more principled approach that is informed by research. Our time is very limited and we would all like to provide effective corrective feedback in a time-efficient way. Certainly we seek to avoid spending time on giving feedback that does not promote improved writing by our students.

### **Best Practices**

Although the primary purpose of this study was to provide an overview of current WCF approaches used in different FL programs without coming to an ultimate “one size fits all” recommendation, it also highlights some best practices that experienced LPDs have successfully implemented in their programs and that other educators in the profession may consider adopting. At the same time, it pointed to some shortcomings that may be remedied or avoided.

In particular, the following best WCF strategies can be distilled from the survey responses:

1. Writing assignments should be varied to include both writing for fluency without providing WCF (e.g., informal genres like journals or blogs) and multi-draft revision-oriented writing with WCF (more formal genres like essays/compositions).
2. Meticulous WCF only on a few targeted structures (selected centrally depending on the curriculum or based on each student’s individual needs) and/or only on a portion of the writing piece is more beneficial since it allows students to focus on specific and manageable improvements.
3. WCF on individual writing pieces should be replaced or supplemented with compiling summaries of most common inaccuracies or infelicitous expressions for whole-class discussions.

In general, there was evidence that a number of LPDs are familiar with contemporary WCF research and implement its findings and recommendations in their programs. For instance, each of the following specific recommendations by Lee (2011) was mentioned in the survey responses at least once: marking errors selectively, using error codes sparingly, familiarizing students with task and genre-specific criteria before writing, asking students to conduct peer- and self-evaluation, and holding writing conferences with students.

## Shift to More Global WCF Types

One implication emerging from the survey results and the review of the relevant research literature is that WCF should not be narrowly conceived of as only feedback on surface grammatical errors. More attention should be devoted to commenting on content and organization as well as to making students aware of various linguistic choices available to them instead of having WCF markings hijack student self-expression suggesting that there is just one “correct” form (as one of the respondents aptly remarked). Moreover, some LPDs suggested supplementing instructor-provided feedback with other writing enhancement activities such as instructor-facilitated peer feedback sessions or pre-writing and post-writing workshops. In general, respondents to this survey seem to align themselves with the findings from recent WCF research indicating that “to be effective, feedback should be conveyed in a number of modes and should allow for response and interaction” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, p. 5). In a similar vein, Lee (2010) argues that sensitizing students “to issues of genre, purpose, audience, and context” (p. 154) should be an integral part of feedback. It should be added that new applications of educational technology may help alleviate the burden of accuracy-oriented WCF, which many teachers feel they are obliged to carry. As research on Intelligent Language Tutoring Systems shows (e.g., Heift, 2008, 2010), individualized corrective feedback on surface-level errors (such as sentence grammar and spelling) contributes to both short-term and long-term writing accuracy improvement. By deferring mechanical WCF types to computer-based tutoring systems, teachers could spend more of their valuable time on providing their students with meaning-oriented and genre-oriented feedback as well as on other writing instruction activities.

## WCF and Teacher Professional Development

On a global level, the study highlights the need for continual professional development of FL teachers to ensure that progressive WCF policies are not only being developed but also implemented. As Lee (2011) notes, “teacher education holds the key to helping teachers understand the need to change and improve their feedback practices, as well as equipping them with the knowledge and skills to implement change” (p. 9). It was encouraging to see that a number of survey respondents embrace models that have been shown to greatly enhance professional development of teaching assistants and novice instructors such as workshops, informal discussions, additional coursework, and opportunities to participate in collaborative activities (see Allen & Paesani, 2010; Lee, 2010, 2011 for model descriptions and reviews). On the other hand, many respondents admitted the lack of a principled approach to teaching writing in their programs and frequently attributed its absence to time constraints. Although some models may indeed seem

to consume too much time and effort to implement, LPDs can take heart in the confirmed fact that even single events like focused workshops may bring considerable results. As Lee (2011) convincingly demonstrated in her article about teacher readiness for a “feedback revolution”, “[a]fter a 90-minute teacher education seminar that provided teachers with opportunities to challenge their own feedback practices, more than half of the participants had become aware of the need for a change in their feedback practices” (p. 8).

### **Teacher Education Materials**

One element that could advance the development of FL writing is coursebooks and other published educational materials. Although there is still dire need for texts adequately addressing contemporary challenges in FL teacher education, some innovative materials have recently emerged. One example of such materials that can be highly recommended for both formal teacher education courses and teacher self-study is the free and publicly available online multimedia FL teaching methods modules developed at the University of Texas at Austin.<sup>4</sup> In the module on writing, Abrams (2010) points out that “writing deserves systematic and continued attention in the foreign language classroom in its own right, not merely as a support skill for listening, reading or speaking” (Conclusion section, para. 1). She presents the teaching of writing as a complex process consisting of activity sets designed in a coherent framework of pre-writing, during writing, and post-writing tasks. Abrams (2010) argues in favor of teaching a variety of written genres for different purposes and audiences including collaborative writing and creative writing (even at beginning levels of FL proficiency) and gives a number of practical tips for giving feedback and teaching editing skills. Importantly, the module clearly separates feedback from grading while showing how the two concepts are interrelated.

### **Development of WCF Policies and Future Research**

In conclusion, LPDs should work together as a professional community in order to implement a principled approach to WCF policies in their writing programs. When based on best practices from the profession and research findings, WCF has the potential to become an integral part of a FL writing curriculum termed “writing-to-learn”, in which writing is conceptualized not as a subsidiary language skill but rather as “a recursive, cognitively-demanding, problem-solving task” (Manchon & Roca de Larios, 2008, p. 104) with high learning potential. Writing-to-learn, being essential for literacy development (Abrams, 2010), is also inextricably intertwined with the multiliteracies pedagogy that is being currently advocated “as the most appropriate instructional framework for teaching language, culture, and literature as a continuous whole in introductory-level collegiate FL courses” (Allen & Paesani, 2010, p. 136; see also Byrnes, 2001; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Kern, 2000;

Swaffar & Arens, 2005). Future research should track how these innovative teaching approaches are being implemented, including investigations into beliefs, practices, and efficacy of existing WCF types and policies. Importantly, as Lee (2011) argues, “there is a need to look beyond the issue of feedback per se to investigate teachers’ readiness to implement change as well as the factors that might facilitate or inhibit change” (p. 10). Case studies, quasi-experimental classroom research, and surveys of opinions and experiences of program directors, instructors, and students are needed to shed more light onto the multifaceted phenomenon of FL writing and written corrective feedback.

## Notes

1. T. Heift © 2003-2010 (<http://www.e-tutor.sfu.ca>)
2. Studies of learners’ perception of teacher feedback are not reviewed here. The reader is referred to Montgomery and Baker (2007) as well as Loewen et al. (2009) for recent reviews.
3. For example, Shrum & Glisan (2010) discuss the “relationship between the quality of learner compositions and whether or not a grade is being given” as well as the portfolio approach “as an alternative to grading every individual writing assignment” in the section entitled “Types of feedback based on goals for writing” (pp. 326-327).
4. <http://coerll.utexas.edu/methods>

## Acknowledgements

This study was supported in part by the University of Kansas General Research Fund. I would like to thank the members of the AAUSC who participated in the survey. I would also like to thank William J. Comer for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article and Phillip H. Hauptman for his help in developing the survey instrument. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the L2 Journal editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions for revising this article.

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## Appendix

### WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK SURVEY QUESTIONS

#### Block I: General Information

1. University (the name of the University will NOT be used as research data. The researcher will use the name to categorize the institution as, for example, “a large Midwestern public university”)
2. Department
3. How many sections of what language do you typically supervise each semester?
4. What is the average size of a language section in your program?
5. How many semesters does your language program include?
6. How many instructors at what rank do you typically supervise each semester?

#### Block II: General Policies about Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

7. Do you have a uniform policy about the format of written corrective feedback (WCF) that your instructors have to provide?
8. Do you employ a uniform list of correction codes in your program? (E.g., SV for subject-verb agreement, T for verb tense, WO for word order, etc.)
9. On what drafts of what writing assignments do your instructors provide WCF? (Check all that apply.)

#### Block III: Specific WCF types applied at the elementary (1-2 sem.) and intermediate (3-4 sem.) level

10. What aspects of writing do you request your instructors to provide feedback on? (check all that apply)
11. What WCF types do you request/recommend to your instructors to use (check all that apply):
12. Do you use computers for writing assignments? Check all that apply.
13. Do you request/encourage your instructors to use peer review and/or peer editing for writing assignments?

#### Block IV: Other Comments

14. Do you suggest that your instructors choose from possible WCF types strategically? If yes, please explain briefly. (E.g., provide direct corrections on grammar aspects not yet learned but codes for grammar aspects already learned.)
15. How do you check whether the instructors follow your recommendations?

16. Are you satisfied with your approach to providing WCF? What would you like to change?

17. Please add any additional comments you like

Thank you for your participation!

May I contact you to request additional information about Writing and WCF in your program? Your email (optional)