Using Written Corrective Feedback to Improve Writing Accuracy of Junior Secondary Students

Selena T. C. Tam & Dr. Eva Chiu
HHCKLA Buddhist Leung Chik Wai College

Abstract

Written corrective feedback (WCF) has long been considered effective in improving students’ writing accuracy. However, it is still uncommon in writing classes in secondary schools in Hong Kong (Lee, 2011, 2013). In this study, a Planning, Experimentation and Reflection (PER) model of change was adopted to investigate the individual responses to the focused feedback and the peer feedback as well as the individual factors affecting their responses. Findings of the study show that the numbers of mistakes students had made reduced while the numbers of errors corrected increased. More able students were also able to mark their peers’ writing. It was found that language abilities might be a factor affecting students’ uptake of WCF.

Introduction

Two types of WCF namely selective marking and peer feedback, have long been promoted in the Curriculum Guide since 1999 (CDC, 1999) and believed to be effective in improving students’ writing accuracy. However, they are still uncommon in writing classes in secondary schools in Hong Kong (Lee, 2011, 2013). Teachers usually have to mark all aspects of students’ writing and students sometimes find it uneasy to make improvements in all these aspects. In fact, a lot of research has revealed that selective marking and peer feedback are more effective than their traditional counterparts (which are unfocused marking and teacher feedback) in improving students’ accuracy as well as their long-term language development in the western contexts.
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and even the local context (Ferris, 1999, 2006; Lee, 2005, 2013). Focused marking may help learners pay attention to fewer types of error so that they can understand the errors more (Ellis et al., 2008). Peer feedback can let students understand more about their strengths and weaknesses (CDC, 2002). Overall, it is worth trying out these WCF in the secondary writing class. This study aims at helping students improve their writing accuracy through the use of these WCF. In this study, a Planning, Experimentation and Reflection (PER) model of change was adopted to investigate the individual responses to the focused feedback and the peer feedback as well as the individual factors affecting their responses.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives of Written Corrective Feedback

Written Corrective Feedback (WCF), which is also called error correction or grammar correction, refers to the “correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student’s ability to write accurately” (Truscott, 1996, p. 329). WCF has been regarded as a normal way of improving students’ writing accuracy and a necessary part of the writing curriculum (Hendrickson, 1978, 1980; Truscott, 1996). It originated from the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Before 1960, language experts who believe in the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis claim that learners make errors in the second language because they are affected by their first language. In other words, their errors can be avoided if they realize the differences between the two languages. Error correction is needed for this reason (Hendrickson, 1978; Selinker, 1969). Also, the audiolingual approach in 1960s encourages the teaching of a second language by memorizing dialogues, studying all the grammatical rules, and avoiding the making of errors (Hendrickson, 1978). In the late 1960s, SLA scholars found that even first language (L1) students would make a lot of errors during their first language acquisition. Therefore, they believed that students’ errors were just a natural part of their language learning process. It means that teachers should tolerate some of students’ errors so as to help them become more confident in expressing themselves using the second language. Also, errors are just as a signal which shows students’ progress in the language learning process (Corder, 1967; Hendrickson, 1978; Lantolf, 1977).

Different learning theories have different views on WCF. For the subscribers to SLA theories, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis informs them of the importance of comprehensive marking. However,
Krashen’s (1985) Monitor Model implies that WCF is ineffective because learning is different from acquisition, which is a subconscious process. In addition, learners acquire the linguistic features of the second language in a predictable order which is not affected by the teaching order. Thus, corrective feedback, which is a conscious process that requires teaching, does not have any role in developing students’ acquired knowledge. However, interaction theories by Long (1996) and Swain (1985, 1995) support the positive role of WCF. These theories state that L2 input must be pushed to give modified output in interactions. That is, learners need to pay attention to the form in the input and the output in order to incorporate the explicit linguistic knowledge into their L2 system as L2 intake, and internalise the knowledge into their long-term memory. The internalisation process is affected by mediating factors such as learners’ amount of attention, motivation, individual cognition and affection.

Other learning theories tend to advocate the positive role of WCF. The skill acquisition models developed by McLaughlin (1990) in the 1980s claim that language learning is just like the learning of cognitive skills and simple processes that can eventually lead to the development of complex behaviour. The socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky’s (1987) states that cognitive development is a result of social interactions between people. Learning happens when a less knowledgeable person interacts with someone more knowledgeable. Lantolf and Thorne (2007) think that if scaffolding occurs in the zone of proximal development in the learner, it can successfully help him or her develop his L2 abilities and become more ‘self-regulated’. As WCF is a way of interaction that is based on students’ levels, it can foster the mastery of the second language.

Types of Written Corrective Feedback

WCF can be categorised into three types. The first type is about who should give feedback, i.e. teacher feedback or peer feedback. The second type is related to how to give feedback, i.e. indirect feedback or direct feedback. The third type is about the extent to which feedback is given, i.e. focused feedback or unfocused feedback as well as treatable or untreatable errors. Teacher feedback means that teachers are responsible for providing WCF to students in L2 writing classes while peer feedback refers to the comments provided by learners’ peers. Direct WCF is defined as that “provides some form of explicit correction of linguistic form or structure above or near the linguistic error. It may consist of the crossing out of an unnecessary
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word/phase/morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme, and the provision of the correct form or structure”. Indirect WCF refers to that “indicates that in some way an error has been made but it does not provide a correction” (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010, p. 209). According to Ellis et al. (2008), focused WCF refers to “(the selection of) specific errors to be corrected and ignores other errors” (p. 356). The extent to which it is focused is dependent upon the number of errors selected. Unfocused WCF refers to the extensive correction of all the errors in students’ written work. It responds to multiple errors and is believed to be a common practice in foreign language writing classrooms (Furneaux et al., 2007). For treatable and untreatable errors, Ferris (1999) explained that errors occur in a patterned and rule-governed way. Students can use a grammar book or set of rules to handle the error. Untreatable errors are the problems with missing words, unnecessary words and word order. They are idiosyncratic and so students need to use their acquired knowledge of the language to correct the error. Thus, according to Ferris (2006), indirect feedback could be given to treatable errors while direct feedback can handle untreatable errors.

Empirical Evidence on Written Corrective Feedback

A lot of research has been conducted in Western contexts to show the efficacy of WCF. For the role of WCF, Truscott (1996) argued that error correction did not have a role in writing courses, as proved by his study and the SLA insights. However, Ferris (1999) found that the empirical evidence presented in Truscott’s study was limited and the methodologies of the previous studies were problematic. Short-term studies revealed that WCF helped students improve their accuracy in their text revision. Also, students believed it is useful. Her belief is that effective grammar correction is selective, prioritized and clear. Regarding different types of WCF, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) found that indirect WCF succeeded in engaging L2 learners in guided learning and problem-solving. It allowed students to reflect on the existing knowledge and foster long-term written accuracy and acquisition. Ellis et al. (2008) claimed that focused CF was theoretically more effective because students could pay attention to a limited number of types of errors and they might understand the nature of errors and the correction more. Empirical studies showed that focused WCF was more effective than unfocused WCF for improving accuracy in text revision as well as immediate and delayed post-tests (Bitchener & Knoach, 2009, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007; van Beuningan et al., 2012).

In terms of the Asian context, Lee (2005, 2011) investigated
the current feedback practices in the L2 writing classrooms in Hong Kong secondary schools using case studies approach. The results revealed that the majority of teachers used unfocused, direct and comprehensive WCF which was extremely time-consuming and ineffective. However, it was perceived to be useful and it was the panel policy. Another study (Lee, 2008) pointed out that more proficient students preferred more WCF strategies while less proficient students benefited more from the focused WCF. For peer feedback, research by different scholars found that trained peer's responses could enhance the quality of students' revision (Berge, 1999; Harmer, 2004). Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) observed that students appreciated the peer WCF because they could understand how teachers think and have a new conception of what writing involved.

**Empirical Evidence on Individual Factors**

Bitchener (2012) stated that individual and contextual factors were the mediating factors affecting the extent to which students engage with WCF. They resulted in learning in terms of uptake, internalization and consolidation. Sheen (2007) found that two individual factors might affect students' retention and uptake from WCF, which were analytic ability and learners' attitudes. She reported that direct CF was more effective for students with higher analytic ability with or without the meta-linguistic explanation. Also, high-aptitude students benefit more from meta-linguistic explanation (Sheen, 2007). Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) found that three affective factors mediated the process of WCF uptake, which were beliefs, goals and attitudes. Findings of research on how learners' attitudes affect peer responses vary (Hu, 2005; Srichanyachon, 2012).

**Methodology**

*Background of the Study*

As mentioned above, this study used the PER design to examine how students respond to the focused WCF and peer feedback as well as the possible factors affecting this. The participants were an average-ability class of Form One students in a Band Two CMI (Chinese as the medium of instruction) school in the New Territories. Most of them did not live in an English-rich environment because they were from the less well-off districts and they studied nearly all the subjects in Chinese. They usually could not write error-free sentences in English. About one-third of them joined tutorial classes after school.
It was a normal practice for teachers to use unfocused and direct feedback in marking students’ writings.

All the 21 students in this class completed the study. Most of them were weak at writing, especially in the areas of idea elaboration and grammatical accuracy. For the sake of in-depth case study, six of them were selected according to their results of the Usage Paper and the Writing Paper in English Language examinations in the first term as well as their motivation to learn English. Two of them were of higher ability. Two of them were of average ability while the remaining two were of weaker ability. Their motivation to learn English, as observed by the main researcher, varied. The Usage Paper, the full mark of which was 50, involved eight marks for explicit tense questions and 24 marks for implicit tense questions (e.g. forming questions, cloze passages). The Writing Paper was based on a descriptive passage in the past tense. The backgrounds of the students were as follows (Table 1),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>201.5</td>
<td>motivated to learn English but not good at writing accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>180.8</td>
<td>not very motivated but the English foundation is fairly good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>162.3</td>
<td>motivated to learn English, but especially weak at writing accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>151.0</td>
<td>motivated to learn English, good at subject-verb agreement but not good at sentence structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>137.5</td>
<td>not very motivated but willing to try when being encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>lower IQ, unable to write accurate sentences, but motivated to learn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers in italics mean that they are below the passing marks.
This study covered four writing cycles. In each writing cycle, students were first taught the target grammar item and asked to use it to write a text of about 150 words. The teacher then marked their texts using the focused WCF and students were asked to do the corrections. For peer feedback, it was the students who marked their peers’ texts instead of the teacher. The writing cycles were conducted by the main researcher, who was the subject teacher of the class. The co-researcher supervised the implementation of the study, analysed the data and evaluated the whole project.

Research Questions

The study aims to investigate the following questions,
1. How do Form 1 students respond to focused marking and peer feedback and how do the two types of WCF affect students’ writing accuracy?
2. What are the individual factors affecting students’ responses of these feedback?

Research Design

The three-stage PER model of change was adopted in this study (Taylor et al., 2005). During the planning stage, the aim was to identify goals and design strategies for improving students’ writing accuracy. Students were expected to use the target grammar items to write personal letters and descriptive texts. The experimentation stage consisted of implementation, observation and evaluation. The use of WCF strategies and target grammar items was emphasized during the pre-writing lessons while students were asked to finish their work during the writing lesson. They were required to revise their texts within the class time during the post-writing lesson. The reflection stage was about reviewing the actions and planning for future actions by asking students to respond to a questionnaire and conducting semi-structural interviews with them. According to Law et al. (2010), there were advantages of using the PER model in action research. By using a problem-solving and critical approach in learning and teaching, changes in pedagogy, which become an open venture, can be located and shared. It is expected that focused WCF and/or peer WCF can become part of the regular curriculum in our junior form English Language classes after this study.
Planning

Data were collected with two tense tests, four texts with focused marking and revisions, bilingual student questionnaires as well as semi-structural interviews. A pre-tense test and a post-tense test were used to see if there was any improvement in the acquisition of the target linguistic items (see Appendix 1). The four writing cycles were all videotaped and conducted in timed settings. Two writing cycles focused on the present tense (pre-present tense assessment and post-present tense assessment) while the other two focused on the past tense (pre-past tense assessment and post-past tense assessment). Four writing topics with which students were familiar were used as prompts for students to write up to the word limit (150 words). As the simple present tense and the simple past tense are the key grammar items in the Form one English Language Curriculum and the major verb forms used in different text types, they would be set as the target grammar items in all the writing cycles. Indirect feedback was given since tenses were the linguistic items that occurred in a systemic way and students were able to use the set of rules to handle their tense errors. Only the errors relating to the main verb would be marked as students were used to making grammatical mistakes relating to sentence structures and other grammatical rules which made their writing difficult to understand. In addition, the main researcher would use direct WCF to correct a few of their major errors to make their writing comprehensible.

Each cycle consisted of three steps. The first step was to explain the target grammar items explicitly. Students were given a focused marking sample and the main researcher explained what focused marking was and how they could correct the underlined errors (Appendix 2). They were asked to write the topic in about 30 minutes (Appendix 3) with relevant key words given as an aid. The researcher then underlined their errors selectively. The second step was to ask students to revise their texts within 20 minutes. They had to correct the underlined errors by themselves. The third step was to ask them to fill out a questionnaire to express how far they could understand the focus of the tasks, the type of teacher feedback they preferred and their views on the focused WCF (see Appendix 4). The third writing cycle, which was about peer assessment, had a different second step. The main researcher allocated copies of students’ writings to their classmates and asked them to underline the errors regarding
the past tense in the main verbs. Students then corrected their errors based on their peers’ marking and their own judgment. Later on, the main researcher marked the photocopies of the writing and asked students to correct their own work once more. The two sets of text plus revisions were compared. Students had to fill out a questionnaire about how far they could understand the focus of the tasks, what they could learn from their peer assessment, and what they could learn from assessing their peers’ writing (see Appendix 5). At the end of the four writing cycles, six students participated in the semi-structural interviews (Appendix 6) about how far they had understood focused WCF and peer feedback when compared with the normal marking practice of the teacher and how they felt about these. A post-tense test was administered after the study to investigate their performances of using the present tense and past tense (Appendix 7).

**Experimentation**

A pre-tense test was given to students before the start of the project to assess their ability to use the correct verb forms. The results showed that students’ performance in using the simple present tense was more stable while that in using the simple past tense varied. Also, their pre-tense test results generally aligned with their First Term English Language Examination results, except for Peter and Lucy (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Past Tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of correct items</td>
<td>% of correct items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The first writing cycle is about writing a 150-word description of a friend using the simple present tense. The uses of the present tense and the forms of ‘be’ and other verbs were taught explicitly. Results showed that only Peter was able to write about the word limit while others wrote about 100 words, except Kate who had difficulties in writing. The number of mistakes they made in the use of present tense ranged from four to seven. Students who made more mistakes were more able to correct their errors. Paul and Peter, who was not good at English and not very motivated, corrected nearly all of the errors. Kate, who had a lower IQ, was also able to correct 71% of the errors. Lucy, who was an average student, was willing to try to correct her errors, although she could not use the correct verb forms (see Table 3).

Table 3  Students’ results in the first writing cycle (Pre-present tense assessment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of words</th>
<th>No. of mistakes</th>
<th>No. of errors corrected</th>
<th>% corrected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the first questionnaire revealed that all students except Kate realised the focus of the task was on present tense. The majority of them wanted the English teacher to highlight some of their errors. Only Lucy preferred comprehensive marking. All of them believed that selective marking was useful because they knew their errors about the present tense.

The second writing cycle focused on the simple past tense the task required asking students to write a descriptive text of a trip to Ocean Park in 150 words. After delivering the past tense lesson, students were given some key words about the park to prompt them to write more (e.g. names of the places). Three of them could reach the word limit. The number of mistakes regarding the past tense ranged from one to six. Mary and Ann, who were more able students,
corrected nearly all the past tense errors and realized that they needed to use the past tense. However, Mary made mistakes in the verb forms (i.e. spelling) whereas Ann failed to locate the main verbs. Kate was willing to do the corrections but could not correct most of her errors (see Table 4).

Table 4  Students’ results in the second writing cycle (Pre-past tense assessment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of words</th>
<th>No. of mistakes</th>
<th>No. of errors corrected</th>
<th>% corrected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results from the second questionnaire were similar to those from the first. Kate still misunderstood the focus of the task. This time, it was Peter who preferred comprehensive marking. Again, all of them showed their positive attitude towards focused marking. Lucy said it helped her memorize the verb forms better. Mary thought that it could give her more practices on tenses. Paul expressed that it focused on the tenses and so he could correct them by checking the tense table.

The third writing cycle was about peer assessment (the past tense). Students were asked to write a personal letter about teenage problems using. The main researcher then distributed their writings and to their peers based on their abilities. Two pieces of writing were marked by more able students. Two were marked by average students while the other two were marked by less able students. As the topic was something new, none of them were able to write up to 150 words. Results indicated that average and more able peers tended to identify and correct more corrected mistakes while the less able students failed to locate them. Also, the percentages of the number of errors corrected based on teacher assessment were higher than those based on peer assessment. From the perspective of post-past tense assessment, the percentages of errors corrected were obviously higher than that in pre-past tense assessment, especially for the weaker ones namely Peter, Lucy and Kate (Table 5).
Table 5  Students’ results in the third writing cycle (Past tense/peer Assessment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of words</th>
<th>No. of corrected mistakes marked by peers</th>
<th>No. of mistakes marked by teacher</th>
<th>Marked by student who was</th>
<th>No. of errors corrected based on peers</th>
<th>No. of errors corrected based on Teacher</th>
<th>% corrected based on peers</th>
<th>% corrected based on Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>less able</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>less able</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>average</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>more able</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>more able</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the third questionnaire survey indicated that less able students tended to misunderstand the focus of the task. They, except Paul, believed they could learn from marking their peers’ writing. Mary stated in the interview that she could learn from marking her peers’ writing. Paul and Lucy did not think they could learn from their peer’s feedback.

The fourth writing cycle served as a post-present tense assessment. Students were asked to describe a member in their families in the present tense. As the cycle was conducted right after the second term test, students were not very motivated and they, except Mary, wrote only about 100 words. The percentages of error corrected were also higher than those in the pre-present tense assessment. Lucy was the only one who did not show any improvement (see Table 6).

Table 6  Students’ results in the fourth writing cycle (Post-present tense assessment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of words</th>
<th>No. of mistakes</th>
<th>No. of errors corrected</th>
<th>% corrected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A test on tenses was administered after the writing cycles. Results revealed that students generally showed improvements in their use of the present tense. However, they performed worse with regard to the past tense. The weaker ones even got no marks in past tense items (Table 7).

Table 7  Students’ results in the final test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Past Tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of corrected items</td>
<td>% of corrected items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Semi-structural interviews were conducted after the post-tense test. The results showed that all students found focused WCF useful because they could focus on a few errors only. However, as the focused WCF was indirect, Paul and Kate expressed that they preferred “direct answers from the teacher”. Lucy found indirect WCF difficult but she still liked it.

All of the writing cycles were observed by the two researchers. During the WCF lessons, students were found to be more focused when they revised the texts when compared with their regular writing lessons. They were more aware of the importance of subject-verb agreement, as proven by the fact that they asked the teacher what verb forms they should use after different subjects. Also they were more willing to correct the errors by themselves.
Reflections

Despite the growth of WCF research studies showing its effectiveness, the adoption of WCF strategies in Hong Kong is still under-investigated. The present study provides empirical evidence on how students responded to the focused and peer feedback and how WCF strategies affected their writing accuracy. The majority of students responded to focused WCF on the present tense positively. They understood the focus of the task and claimed that they liked focused marking. When the pre-present tense assessment was compared with the post-present tense assessment, students showed improvements in reducing the numbers of mistakes made and also increasing the numbers of errors corrected. Students, except Kate and Lucy, performed obviously better in the post-tense test than the pre-tense test. Kate was a very weak student and tended to misunderstand the focus of the task. Lucy, who was weak in writing, failed to benefit from focused WCF in terms of accuracy. She still made a lot of present tense mistakes in her writing and could not correct them. However, she had shown some improvements in tense tests.

Students believed that focused WCF on the past tense was useful and commented very positively about it despite making quite a lot of mistakes in the post-past tense assessment. They said that it helped them memorise the verb forms better. Paul, who was weak and not motivated to learn, even pointed out that focused and indirect WCF helped him focus on the verb forms in the main verbs and so he could correct them by checking the tense table on his own. As conended by Ellis et al. (2008), focused WCF might help learners pay attention to fewer types of error so they understand the errors more. Also, the increase in the percentages of error corrected in the post-past tense assessment was obvious, especially in the cases of weaker students. These conformed to previous studies that less proficient students could correct treatable errors by themselves and benefit from focused and indirect feedback (Ferris, 2006, Lee, 2008). Students did not perform well in the post-tense test probably because it was more difficult than the pre-tense test.

The results of the peer assessment depicted that more able students were able to mark their peers’ writing. Mary even expressed that she could learn from the process. The possible reason was that peer feedback let students understand more about their strengths and weaknesses (CDC, 2002). The weaker ones, however, did not believe in their peers’ assessment, as shown by the lower percentages of the number of errors corrected. Lucy, Paul and Peter were concerned
that their peers might not be able to mark their errors. Their worry was in line with Harmer’ findings (2004) that peers had to be trained in order to provide useful feedback. Nevertheless, most of the students claimed that peer assessment was useful because it could help them check their writing one more time.

With respect to individual factors, learners’ language abilities might have an effect on students’ uptake of WCF. Mary and Ann, who are more able students, showed improvements in the percentages of numbers of errors corrected in post assessments. They might have better metalinguistic knowledge and so could use grammar rules to handle focused and “treatable” errors. For the weaker students, the main researcher observed that the focused WCF successfully helped them focus on the errors, but they failed to correct them because they did not know the correct verb forms, as proven by the fact that they kept asking the researcher the spelling of the verb forms. The second possible factor was students’ beliefs. The weaker ones did not believe in their peer’s judgement on their writing and so they did not respond to their WCF even though some of them were correct. After all, the effect of learners’ attitudes was not very obvious as less motivated students were still able to benefit from the WCF.

There are some limitations in the present study. All the writing tasks in this study were low-stakes. Students knew that these were for research purpose only so they became less and less motivated towards the end of the study. They were not very willing to respond to the indirect WCF because it required problem-solving and was different from their feedback they received in regular lessons. In terms of research design, the levels of difficulty of the two tense tests were different and so it might slightly affect the reliability of the study. Due to time-frame limitations, peer assessment and the post-past tense assessment needed to be done in one writing cycle. Training can be provided to students on how to use selective mark before the study.

In terms of future actions, the writing cycles could become part of the regular curriculum or even daily assessment in order to encourage students’ active use of the language. Also, indirect feedback should be used in some of the writing lessons to familiarise them with feedback. Further research could be conducted with more than one class of students in quasi-experimental settings to determine the efficacy of WCF in between-subject groups. Contextual factors such as social relationships between teachers and learners as well as learners’ educational background can also be investigated.
Conclusion

This study has adopted a PER model of change to examine students’ responses to the focused and peer WCF and the individual factors affecting the responses. Students found focused WCF useful in helping them acquiring the present and past tenses. The weaker ones had also benefitted from focused and indirect feedback as they could focus on a few errors and use the grammar rules to handle errors. The more able students could mark their peers’ writing selectively, but the weaker students did not believe in their peers’ feedback. Learners’ language abilities and students’ beliefs might be the factors affecting the uptake of WCF. It is obvious that students overall responded to the focused WCF and peer assessment positively.
References


Appendix 1 Pre-Tense test

Fill in the blanks with the correct tense of verbs.

One day Leonardo da Vinci came (come) to an old man. He 1. _____________(want) the old man to 2. _____________ (teach) him to draw. The old man 3. _________________ (welcome) him, then 4. _______________ (give) him an egg and 5. _______________ (tell) him to draw it. Leonardo 6. _______________ (work) quickly and 7. ______________ (show) his drawing to the old man.

“8. ________________ (draw) it again!” 9. _________________ (say) the old man. Soon after, Leonardo 10. ________________ (draw) another egg. His picture 11. ________________ (look) good but the old man 12. ________________ (make) him do it again and again. Then Leonardo 13. _______________ (become) angry. He 14. ________________ (say), ‘I can 15. ________________ (draw) an egg in two minutes. Why 16. _______________ you ____________ (keep) me waiting? Please 17. ________________ (teach) me how to draw now.”

The old man 18. ________________(smile) and said, ‘Yes, you 19. ________________(be) right. You can draw an egg quickly, but it 20. ________________(take) you many years to draw on very well.’

(Items 2 and 16 are excluded)
Appendix 2  Focused Marking Sample to Students

Sandy is my classmates. She is 12 years old. She **wear** a long ponytail. She **was** energetic and intelligent.

She **like** sports and she always **get** good marks in exam. She likes tell jokes. We think she is always funny.

She is sporty. She hobby **are** dancing. She in many place **join** dance club. She joins many competitions and **was won** many prizes. She **teach** me how to dance.

She **have** other hobby. She **like** play guitar. Every Sunday, I **shows** the guitar with her.

I very like her! She is my best friend!

Appendix 3  Topics of the Writing Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Cycle</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Focus of the Cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Describing a friend</td>
<td>Pre-present tense assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A trip to Ocean Park</td>
<td>Pre-past tense assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A personal letter</td>
<td>Post-past tense assessment Peer assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Describing a family member</td>
<td>Post-present tense assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4  Questionnaire for the First and Second Writing Cycles

Form 1 English Language
WCF Study Questionnaire

This study aims to find out your views about the use of selective marking and peer feedback. Circle the answer that suits you most. All your answers will be treated confidentially.
此研究的目的是找出你對選擇性修改文章及學生互評的意見。請選擇最適合你的答案。所有答案均會保密。

1. What is the target grammar item in this writing practice?
是次寫作練習是著重於哪一種文法？
A. Present tense
B. Past tense
C. Future tense
D. Prepositions

2. Which of the following do you like best?
以下哪一種你最喜歡？
A. My English teacher highlights all of my errors.
我的英文老師指出我的作文中的所有錯誤。
B. My English teacher highlights some of my errors.
我的英文老師指出我的作文的某些錯誤。
C. My English teacher does not highlight any of my errors.
我的英文老師沒有指出我的作文中的任何錯誤。

3. Do you think selective marking (e.g. only marking the tense in your compositions) can help you learn tense better? Why or why not?
你認為選擇性改修改文章（例如只修改文章中的時態）能幫你學習時態學得更好嗎？為什麼？

___________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________
Appendix 5  Questionnaire for the Third Writing Cycle

This study aims to find out your views about the use of selective marking and peer feedback. Circle the answer that suits you most. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

此研究的目的是找出你對選擇性修改文章及學生互評的意見。請選擇最適合你的答案。所有答案均會保密。

1. What is the target grammar item in this writing practice?
   是次寫作練習是著重於哪一種文法？
   A. Present tense
   B. Past tense
   C. Future tense
   D. Prepositions

2. Do you think you can learn tense better through peer assessment (e.g. helping your classmates mark their writing) Why or why not?
   透過學生互評 (例如幫助同學改文)，你認為你能從中學習時態學得更好嗎？為什麼？

   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________

3. Do you think you can learn tense better from your classmates' feedback (e.g. letting your classmates mark your writing) Why or why not?
   你認為你是否能從同學的反饋中 (例如讓同學改你的文章) 能幫你學習時態學得更好嗎？為什麼？

   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
Appendix 6  Semi-structural Interview Questions

1. 你知道選擇性修改文章和綜合性修改文章 (即平時老師的改文方式) 的分別嗎？
2. 就第一篇作文而言，這是一篇個人檔案，要形容一個人，你知道要用什麼時態嗎？
3. 你知道為什麼要把某些字劃下橫線嗎？
4. 你認為這種方法能提點你用正確的時態嗎？
5. 就第二篇作文而言，這是一篇記叙文，你知道要用什麼時態嗎？
6. 就第三篇作文而言，你認為如果同學先幫你修改文章，你能更容易發現自己的錯誤嗎？
Appendix 7  Post Tense Test

Complete each blank using the correct form of the given verb. The first one has been done for you as an example.

Sasha’s Blog

First Day  1 September 2013

I (e.g.) ___am___(be) really nervous about the more difficult work for this year. I (1)____________________(not do) very well last year, but I (2)____________________(hope) I can (3)____________________(do) better this year.

In addition, I (4)____________________(be) a Form 1 student this year, so the school (5)____________________(be) new to me. I (6)____________________(try) to cope with the new environment. I’m afraid I am not at the same level as my classmates. I am so glad Michelle and I are in the same class.

My class teacher (7)____________________(be) Miss Ho, and she (8)____________________(seem) to be a very nice teacher. This morning she (9)____________________(talk) to us patiently about the school, and the things we (10)____________________(do) in the next two months. I (11)____________________(feel) so happy when she (12)____________________(tell) us she would also be our English teacher.

I (13)____________________(hope) I can do well this year, and I (14)____________________(want) to make as many new friends as possible.

How (15)____________________(be) your first day at school, Janet?

Posted: 1 Sep 9.45 p.m.

(Item 10 is excluded)