

Exploring L2 Written Corrective Feedback in the Saudi Context: A Critical Review

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Received: August 25, 2022

Accepted: October 15, 2022

Online Published: November 26, 2022

doi:10.5430/wjel.v12n7p284

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n7p284>

Abstract

Written corrective feedback (WCF) has received increased attention in recent years because of its widespread implementation and also due to the philosophical debate around its nature, function, and potential benefits. The purpose of this study is to examine the areas that demonstrate development in terms of scope when it comes to WCF in the Saudi context. The study analyses thirty publications that were published between 2016 and 2021 and retrieved from Semantic Scholar and Google Scholar, to assess the key findings on three dimensions: (1) effectiveness of WCF; (2) comparative effectiveness of different strategies in WCF; and (3) beliefs and attitudes of students/teachers toward WCF. Application of the PRISMA 2020 approach shows that most studies on WCF in Saudi Arabia investigated the beliefs and attitudes of students and teachers towards WCF followed by the effectiveness of WCF for learners, and comparative effectiveness of different strategies in WCF to students. The outcomes of this study indicate that a number of difficulties surrounding the scope of feedback need researchers' attention, and that there is also a need to address the existing technique imbalance by including a greater diversity of research procedures in future research designs.

Keywords: attitudes, beliefs, preferences, PRISMA, written corrective feedback

1. Introduction

In learning contexts such as English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), assessment is an institutional as well as individual need for learners as error correction contributes towards the achievement of writing clarity and fluency. Whereas assessment is a natural step in learning, error correction ensures reduction in frequency of occurrence and severity of errors (Karim & Endley, 2019). At the same time, the nature of feedback, time dedicated to feedback, and even the psychology of the learners are all important factors to consider in the language classroom when deciding how much and what type of feedback to encourage in the future (Ryan & Henderson, 2018). The academic literature focuses on feedback as a pedagogical method for teaching writing in the target language (L2). In particular, earlier research examined how students' beliefs and preferences as well as teachers' beliefs and real CF practices. However, there is a paucity of research on WCF conducted in various settings in relation to the impact of contextual elements, such as the events, experiences, and connections that shape the learning experience and student engagement. Nevertheless, the significance of corrective feedback is why various research studies have been undertaken to establish the usefulness of WCF over both the long and short term (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Sato & Loewen, 2018).

According to Lee (2020), learner's understanding of and attitudes toward WCF are among the most important components of learner's engagement that have been explored extensively. Other studies have investigated what feedback methods are most applicable also explored learners and teachers' feedback choices and views of WCF in L2 settings (Boggs, 2019; Mao & Lee, 2020; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Many other studies focused on the different aspects of feedback and the best ways to employ for optimum learning gains (Westmacott, 2017; Zhang & Cheng, 2021). Despite this, research on WCF has neglected to take other elements into account. In particular, the crux of the problem remains unexplored: how learner's factors and contextual factors influence students' engagement in classroom environments? Even though written corrective feedback has been found an important aspect in writing assessment, teachers, in most cases, are left with little formatted practices or guidelines for execution (Ellis, 2009).

2. Research Objectives

Despite the variety of methods to implement written corrective feedback (CF), it is possible that writing teachers may supply learners with content that is ineffective or does not meet their preferences. As a result, it is vital to consider the preferences of EFL students in the teaching and learning processes. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to critically review previous research conducted in the Saudi context under three categories: EFL students and instructors' beliefs and attitudes toward WCF, the impact of CF in developing Saudi EFL students' writing ability, and how CF was correlated with feedback strategies. The following research question was developed as a result:

What areas demonstrate development in terms of scope when it comes to WCF in the Saudi context?

This question serves as a guide for identifying the research to be reviewed in this study, which will also examine the research areas being explored in recent investigations.

3. Significance of the Study

This study is important as it provides deep and critical exploration of the studies conducted on written corrective feedback in the Saudi context. It gathered these studies over five years under some restrictive inclusive procedures. Noticeably, previous research papers focused on the type of corrective feedback with other variables, such as the effectiveness WCF on EFL students' writing development, or learners' engagement with CF. This study enhances efforts to enrich our understanding of the current trends of research related to WCF in Saudi Arabia where much research is still needed. This study will be helpful as an indicator to expand on this area of inquiry. Researchers can use the data provided to conduct more experimental studies and explore new topics related to corrective feedback.

4. Literature Review

Feedback that is critical in nature is known as corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009). According to research, there is a strong correlation between WCF and student progress in second language learning and successful teaching of writing to English language learners (Evans et al., 2010). In addition, teachers of English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL) have a sense of the language aspect that is most relevant to their students' requirements (Chen & Zhang, 2021). There are different results reported in research studies that investigated specific forms of feedback, such as direct, indirect corrective feedback of surface-level information, and mistake coding that were implemented for the sake of improving students' performance (Westmacott, 2017). Only altering the learner's output to produce a version that is error-free is seen as modifying the direct CF form. However, indirect feedback correction was found very helpful to push self-directed learning that has the potential to enhance the language learner's performance (Ferris, 2018).

Even though there are contradicting views on the WCF validity in L2 settings, many recent studies endorsed giving constructive criticism to non-native language writers to improve their writing abilities (Boggs, 2019). When it comes to the nature of feedback, the type of teacher response they receive determines how helpful the advice is. Many researchers have suggested that combining diverse approaches for corrective feedback on writing resulted in challenges in showing the impact of feedback on ESL/EFL writing (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Learner's engagement with CF was characterized by Ellis (2010) on the basis of how learners respond to that feedback, who considers cognition, behavior, and emotion. This has been expanded in subsequent research to include how students process and respond to WCF. In addition to variations occurring between people, learner's engagement with WCF is concurrently influenced by both learner's variables and context (Ferris, 2018). Murphy and Roca de Larios (2010) found in their review article that a variety of learner's characteristics influence how well students engage with WCF, including age, language aptitude, learning style, motivation, goals, and beliefs. Learners may have their own agenda, which is not always in sync with the teachers', and this can lead to a lack of genuine involvement. High competence in second language (L2), as well as a wider range of learning methodologies, contribute to a deeper comprehension of WCF and more active help-seeking (Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

Different approaches of classifying contextual factors have been devised. Some agree that WCF exists in a wide range of situations, from the most immediate to larger societal and cultural contexts. Ellis (2010) and Murphy and Roca de Larios (2010) distinguished between macro-level (ESL, EFL, immersion contexts, and learning-to-write or writing-to-learn settings) and micro-level context variables in their analyses of contextual factors (the classroom context). Contextual factors (ranging from the institution's reasoning to the classroom climate) and methodological variables (i.e., how WCF is made available to students), as defined by Evans *et al.* (2010), are distinct from each other. Research on writing feedback that was focused on the social aspects of the learning context provided comprehensive and detailed accounts of the instructional, interpersonal, and interactional aspects of learning as well

as curricular, programmatic, institutional, and sociopolitical and sociocultural factors (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). As a result, this body of work also emphasized the interplay between many components that arise from distinct levels of context (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Learners' engagement with WCF is part of the richness and complexity of classroom life, which is reflected in the vast range of learner's characteristics and contextual factors. Accordingly, there is a degree of complication since several elements can sometimes work together in harmony to aid learning, but they can also exert opposing pressures on one another. Experimental or quasi-experimental research, on the other hand, cannot capture the dynamic interaction between learner variables and environmental elements (Lee, 2020). The ecological view, on the other hand, stresses the connection of persons and the setting while rejecting an approach to evaluating human behaviour in isolation. When it comes to teaching English, one of the most effective tools teachers have at their disposal is corrective feedback (CF). In many cases teachers in English classes prefer to modify the methods they use to provide feedback to students based on their abilities, types of mistakes, and the context. Therefore, EFL teachers employ a variety of methods, including direct and indirect CF, to help students become aware of their mistakes and learn from them (Ferris, 2018).

The current study analyzes thirty publications with the use of PRISMA 2020 approach for the purpose of examining the studies that explored the nature of WCF provided to Saudi students in different settings, problems encountered, learners' perceptions, teachers' perceptions as well as their actual performance when providing WCF and how all those variables contributed to the development of learners; writings performance.

5. WCF in the Saudi Context

There have been some notable studies on teachers and students' beliefs toward written corrective feedback in the Saudi context. For example, Alzahrani (2016) reported that English language teachers at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) believe that coded unfocused corrective comments can help students improve the correctness of their writing. Students who participated in the study felt that the practice of giving students coded, unfocused feedback at KAU is successful in helping them write better and is best suited for higher-level students who are driven to rectify all faults. Furthermore, Alshahrani (2017) explored the WCF provided to 45 students' written texts by three writing teachers at a Saudi university, using follow-up interviews with the teachers to ascertain their beliefs and rationale for their current practices of providing WCF, as well as questionnaires completed by the students. The survey discovered that teachers employed a thorough strategy while distributing WCF. Except for one instructor, this approach reflected both the students' choices and the teachers' opinions.

Similarly, Rajab (2018) inquired into the perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors of EFL instructors and learners about written corrective feedback in the Saudi higher education environment. It was found that both teachers and learners indicated a high degree of interest in WCF. Learners also stated that having a well-structured WCF enhances their overall language acquisition and familiarizes them better with the language. Additionally, the data analysis revealed some disparities in how instructors and learners view WCF in general, with teachers preferring coded WCF and learners preferring unfocused WCF. Gamlo (2019) investigated Saudi EFL learners' preferences and attitudes about the use of CF during speaking exercises. The findings indicated that students had a favorable attitude toward CF during speaking exercises, with a well-defined consensus that their professors' CF might help them develop their speaking abilities. Additionally, the survey discovered that students sought quick CF from their instructors, whom they perceived to be the best suited to deliver such feedback. Furthermore, a majority of respondents preferred to get CF for vocal grammatical mistakes.

Albogami (2020) explored L2 instructors and students' perspectives of the relevance of written feedback and the components of successful written feedback in an EFL context at King Saud University Preparatory-Year College. The findings indicated that both instructors and students recognized the significance of written feedback in reinforcing learning, building confidence, promoting autonomous learning, and facilitating interaction between teachers and students in the English writing classroom. Finally, Halim *et al.* (2021) conducted a study to ascertain EFL students' attitudes toward remedial feedback. The findings indicate that students have a favorable attitude toward teachers' corrective feedback because they view it as a stimulating learning tool. Not only that, learners also indicated that corrective feedback is quite beneficial in strengthening the EFL learning process.

6. Methods

This systematic literature review was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020). PRISMA is a popular evidence-based guideline for conducting systematic reviews and meta-analyses to report clear, transparent, and comprehensive results (Sarkis-Onofre *et al.*, 2021). This review

comprises four stages: Identification, Screening phase, Eligibility, and finally, Inclusion phase. It is a content analysis of research papers published in Semantic and Google Scholar databases. This investigation aimed to uncover the impact of WCF on students, compare the effectiveness amongst different WCF strategies and probe attitudes of students/teachers toward WCF. Before initiating the actual review, pertinent issues were highlighted by forming a panel of four EFL experts who were university professors at an English department, specialized in Applied Linguistics, and had more than five years of experience in teaching writing in the Saudi context. This helped frame questions before commencing with the review so that relevant data could be identified in the selected sources. Moreover, the inclusion of papers in this research was systematically done according to the keywords criteria mentioned below. All research works consulted were included herein and duly cited. Finally, the findings were systematically presented; no bias by the researcher was allowed to interfere to ensure fair reporting of findings of the study.

Search strategy

As stated earlier, this study used Semantic Scholar and Google Scholar to access and isolate publications related to written corrective feedback in Saudi higher education settings from between 2016 and 2021. Semantic Scholar is a search engine underpinned for academic papers by artificial intelligence that provides the possibility to generate summaries of academic articles. On the other hand, scholarly literature from a wide range of publishers and fields can be found for free on Google Scholar, which provides both text and metadata.

Keywords

Semantic and Google Scholar publications were searched using the keywords "written corrective feedback" and "Saudi".

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To find relevant studies for this investigation, a comprehensive search was conducted. All relevant articles based on original search were gathered. After the first selection of publications was done, the inclusion criteria were used to choose the studies that would be included in this review. In order to assess the quality of prior research, certain inclusion criteria were set. The parameters were: i. a period of study conclusion between 2016 and 2021; ii. study conducted in Saudi Arabia; iii. study dealing with written corrective feedback.

Screening phase

During the screening phase, duplicates from Semantic and Google Scholars were spotted and eliminated. It was determined that the remaining papers fulfilled all the inclusion criteria. Studies that did not fit the inclusion criteria were excluded.

Eligibility phase

The studies considered in this review were all relevant to the research issue in some way. The primary objective of the study was to examine the remedial feedback in Saudi Arabia. The studies included here helped to form the theoretical framework associated with corrective feedback. As stated earlier, studies that were not connected to the theoretical framework were eliminated. The findings were given a great deal of attention to ensure that the study issue was properly explored and examined.

Exclusion phase

Exclusion criteria included articles that were unrelated to the limiters and keywords. Among the restrictions imposed were English, Saudi context, and availability of the complete text. Exclusions were made owing to unrelated publications and articles that focused on other feedback strategies.

This search found 27 results from Semantic Scholar and 273 results from Google Scholar. The papers were assessed, and 52 studies were found to be replicated, 248 were evaluated, and 65 publications were removed due to their irrelevance such as chapters and proceedings. A total of 183 full-text publications were then examined for eligibility. Out of 183 articles, 153 were eliminated due to factors such as relating to other types of feedback and being outside the Saudi context. The remaining 30 full-length publications were then screened to identify those that discussed corrective feedback in the Saudi context. The selection procedures are shown in Figure 1.

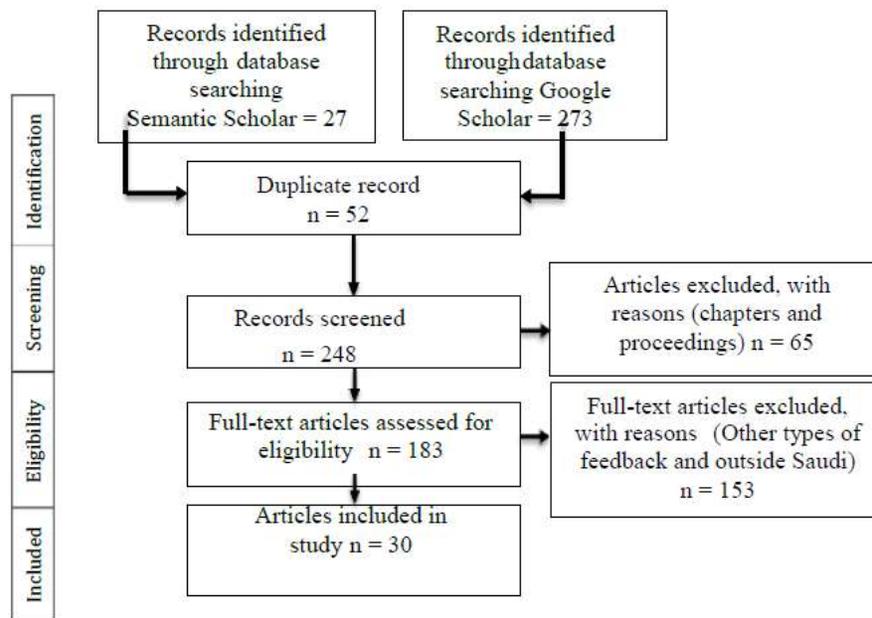


Figure 1. The process of research article selection

7. Results

Following the four processes, 30 articles were recognized as being relevant to the topic of "written corrective feedback" in the Saudi context. Among the research areas identified, beliefs and attitudes of students/teachers were the most commonly studied, followed by effectiveness of WCF to learners and how far teachers' real WCF practices matched learners' preferences. The results are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research areas of the selected articles

No	Authors	Study Design	EF	CE	BA
1	Albogami (2020)	MM			✓
2	Alharbi (2016)	QN	✓		
3	Alharbi (2020)	QN		✓	
4	Alhaysony (2016)	QN			✓
5	Al-Hazzani & Altalhab (2018)	QN	✓		
6	Aljasir (2021)	QL			✓
7	Al-Madani & EL-Sakran (2017)	QN			✓
8	Almohizea (2018)	QL	✓		
9	Alrefaee (2020)	QN		✓	
10	Al-Saleh (2018)	QN	✓		
11	Alsallami (2017)	MM			✓
12	Alsharif & Alyousef (2017)	QL			✓
13	Alshehri (2017)	QL	✓		
14	Alsolami & Elyas (2016)	QL		✓	
15	Alsolami (2021)	QN	✓		
16	Al-Wossabi (2019)	QN			✓
17	Alzahrani (2016)	QL			✓
18	Aseeri (2019)	QN			✓
19	Basabrin (2019)	QL			✓
20	Daweli (2018)	QL	✓		
21	Elborolosy (2019)	MM		✓	
22	Elborolosy (2020)	QN	✓		
23	Gamlo (2019)	MM			✓
24	Halim <i>et al.</i> (2021)	QN			✓
25	Hanif (2021)	QN			✓
26	Hidayah (2021)	QL			✓
27	Qutob & Madini (2020)	MM			✓
28	Rajab (2018)	MM			✓
29	Rajab <i>et al.</i> (2016)	MM			✓
30	Alshahrani (2017)	QL			✓

QL= Qualitative Research, QN= Quantitative Research, MM= Mixed Methods Research.

EF = Effectiveness, CE = Comparative Effectiveness, BA = Beliefs and Attitudes.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of studies based on WCF. As much as 43.3% of the investigated studies followed a quantitative research design, whereas 33.3% of the studies were qualitative. Only 23.3% of the inclusive studies followed mixed methods designs.

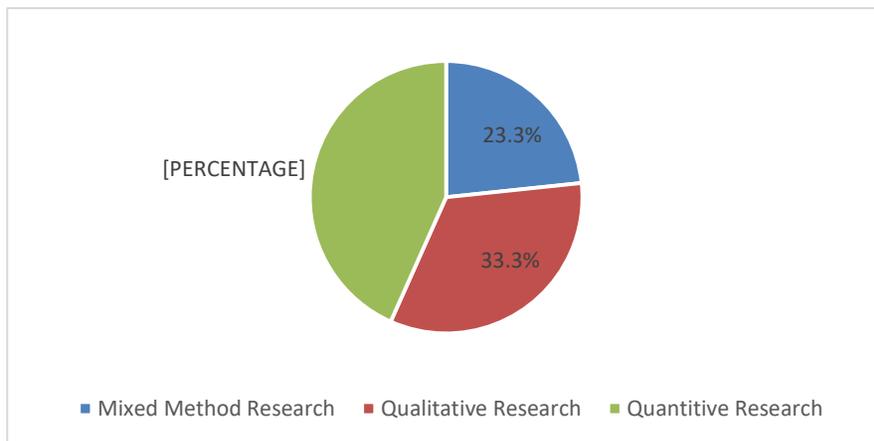


Figure 2. The percentage of studies based on WCF

Figure 3 depicts the proportion of subject matter of the studies included here. According to the pie chart, the most frequently investigated issues were students' and teachers' beliefs and attitudes (60%), followed by the effectiveness of WCF for learners (27%), and comparative effectiveness of different strategies in WCF for students (13%). This suggested that most studies on WCF in Saudi investigated the beliefs and attitudes of students/teachers towards WCF, while comparative effectiveness was the least researched topic.

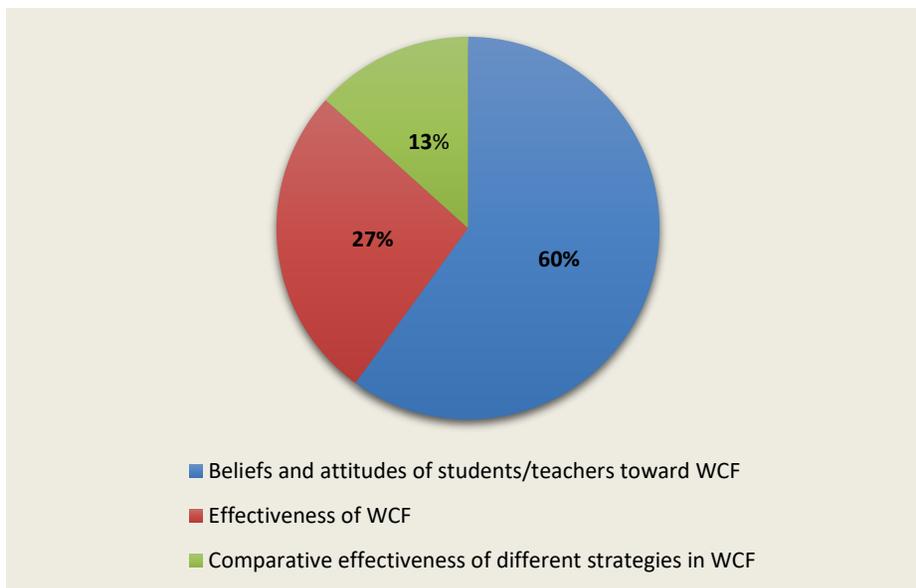


Figure 3. The percentage of most studied research areas in WCF

8. Discussion

The current study also found that approximately a quarter of the research on WCF in Saudi Arabia explored the effectiveness of WCF for learners, as is evident in the studies of Alharbi (2016), Al-Hazzani and Altalhab (2018), Altalhab (2018), Elborolosy (2020), Al-Saleh (2018) and Alsolami (2021). This finding can imply that, since 2016, Saudi EFL researchers and instructors have believed in the importance of WCF in improving the writing competency of their students. They employed different paradigms, or different types of feedback to enhance their students' mastery of language skills.

Some studies experimentally explored the effect on WCF on students' writing ability (Alharbi, 2016; Al-Hazzani & Altalhab 2018). Alharbi (2016) and Al-Hazzani and Altalhab (2018) investigated the influence of written corrective

feedback on Saudi EFL students. The results suggested that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the measure, demonstrating that instructors' written CF had a substantial beneficial influence on participants' writing abilities. Furthermore, the influence of CF on Saudi learners' speaking skills was examined. Alsolami (2021) reported some evidence that identifying and recognizing various sorts of dramatic tactics and oral feedback has an effect on the rate of oral language skill development. Additionally, Alsolami (2021) examined how the CF in the speaking process influences EFL learners' motivation to talk in communicative classes. This finding is confirmed by previous studies conducted in different contexts which showed that learners benefit from using electronic CFs. Due to the large number of students or COVID-19 restrictions, some instructors employed electronic CF. Moreover, Rajab *et al.*, (2016; Westmacott, (2017) found that certain types of feedback, such as direct, indirect corrective feedback of surface-level information, and mistake coding, work better than other types of CF in enhancing students' performance.

The majority of research papers included in this study concerned the beliefs and attitudes of students/teachers toward WCF (Albogami, 2020; Alzahrani, 2016; Alshahrani, 2017 Gamlo, 2019; Halim *et al.*, 2021). Such studies explored the beliefs and attitudes of both instructors and students on the importance of WCF in boosting Saudi EFL students writing abilities. However, the previously mentioned studies characterized the attitudinal perspectives which may truly or exaggeratedly show the real practices, such studies employed mixed methods paradigm (e.g., Albogami, 2020; Alsallami, 2017; Gamlo, 2019; Rajab, 2018; Rajab *et al.*, 2016) which confirmed the reliability and validity of the findings.

Alzahrani (2016) reported that English language professors and students at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) believe that coded unfocused corrective comments can help students improve their writing quality. Also, Alshahrani (2017) explored three Saudi university writing instructors' beliefs and rationale for their current WCF practices. The survey discovered that teachers employed a thorough strategy while distributing WCF. Similarly, Rajab (2018) found that both teachers and learners indicated a high degree of interest in WCF, however teachers preferred coded WCF and learners preferring unfocused WCF. Gamlo's (2019) study reported that Saudi EFL students had a favorable attitude toward CF during speaking exercises, with a solid consensus that their professors' CF might help them develop their speaking abilities. Additionally, the study discovered that a majority of students preferred to get CF for vocal grammatical mistakes. Likewise, Albogami's (2020) study indicated that both instructors and students recognized the significance of written feedback in terms of how it reinforces learning, builds confidence, promotes autonomous learning, and facilitates interaction between teachers and students in the English writing classroom. Finally, Halim *et al.* (2021) indicated that students have a favorable attitude towards teachers' corrective feedback because they view it as a stimulating learning tool. Not only that, learners also indicated that corrective feedback is quite beneficial in strengthening the EFL learning process.

Moreover, four papers from the reviewed 30 studies compared the effectiveness of different strategies in WCF (Alharbi, 2020; Alrefaee, 2020; Alsolami & Elyas, 2016; Elboroloy, 2019). Three of them followed the quantitative paradigm and only Elboroloy (2019) pursued the mixed methods paradigm. In a study by Alsolami and Elyas (2016), the several forms of CF were explored. The results of this study showed that metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, repetition, and explicit correction, were far more successful in eliciting repair but were rarely used in EFL courses. Moreover, Alharbi (2020) examined the relative efficacy of three distinct forms of written corrective feedback, as well as feedback versus no feedback in the context of students writing quality. The findings indicated that, of the three forms of feedback, direct written corrective feedback was the most successful at enhancing students' writing quality, as well as the most preferred method by the subjects.

9. Conclusion

This study contributes to our knowledge of the scope of feedback in WCF scholarship. One distinguishing element of this research synthesis is that it examines pertinent studies from the standpoint of feedback scope, an area of study that has received less attention in the literature. Researchers may be prompted to further investigate the influence of the scope on learners' written production and L2 development in the light of the findings from this review. For instructors, the evaluation may give some important information that can guide them in making informed decisions about the extent to which problems in student writing should be handled.

The focus of this comprehensive assessment of the literature was on the research on written corrective feedback in the Saudi setting. As outlined in the research question, most studies on WCF in Saudi investigated the beliefs and attitudes of students/teachers towards WCF followed by the effectiveness of WCF for learners, and comparative effectiveness of different strategies in WCF for students. Another significant feature of this study is that it provides a comprehensive overview of the spectrum of feedback in WCF studies, supplementing past reviews and syntheses that

focused only on quantitative investigations. As shown by the review, WCF research on the scope of feedback has included quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods methodologies. Generally, a majority of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches were utilized to examine student/teacher perceptions and attitudes toward WCF, which may have inspired researchers to study the (mis)alignment between teachers' opinions about their WCF practice and their actual practices.

10. Limitations

Several difficulties and limitations were observed during the course of this investigation. This study analyzed just 30 publications from Semantic and Google Scholar given the limited scope of the study. Future research might benefit from examining other variables such as individual and contextual factors, linguistic and affective factors, and timing of focused WCF. In addition, the researcher feels that the search engines may present a larger number of papers with changes in the keywords used but this was not implemented due to study scope constraints.

11. Recommendations

The outcomes of this study indicate that the many problems that inhibit the scope of feedback need researchers' attention, and that there is a need to address the existing technique imbalance in research by including a greater diversity of research procedures in the future. To demonstrate or clarify unresolved difficulties in the literature, more qualitative and mixed-methods studies should be encouraged since they may provide numerous sources of data and lead to findings that are more applicable to real classrooms. Furthermore, based on the critical reviewing of the previous studies, the majority of WCF research revolve around fixed variables, such as attitudes, and effects. There is a need for grounded studies to establish a framework or theory beginning from the theoretical background and ending with the practical application of such framework. Such deep understanding of the concept will ensure teachers provide appropriate feedback to their students. These proposals may echo the arguments made in some recently published publications on scope of feedback (Mao & Lee, 2020), which argue that more emphasis should be paid to WCF research in this direction of feedback as it has great pedagogical value for naturalistic L2 writing classes.

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