Student Engagement with Teacher Written Corrective Feedback among Chinese Private College Students of Varying Language Proficiencies

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Abstract

While the efficacy of teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) has been extensively explored, a research gap exists in examining the disparities in how low-proficiency (LP) and high-proficiency (HP) students receive such feedback in second language (L2) writing. Through an analysis of five writing tasks distributed over a 16-week course, this research explored the affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of student engagement with WCF. Six Chinese EFL sophomores, three designated as LP and three as HP students, were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection methods included analysis of students' L2 writing tasks and stimulated recall sessions. The findings illustrate varying engagement patterns, highlighting LP students' frustrations and HP students' reflective and constructive interactions with feedback. These patterns are interpreted through the lens of sociocultural, social cognitive, student engagement, and complex dynamic systems theories, offering a multifaceted framework for understanding the influence of WCF on L2 writing proficiency. These findings also contribute to language learning pedagogy by highlighting the importance of tailored feedback strategies that address the comprehensive dimensions of student engagement to enhance the pedagogical effectiveness of WCF in fostering language proficiency and engagement in EFL settings.

Keywords: teacher written corrective feedback, L2 writing, student engagement, low-proficiency student, high-proficiency student

1. Introduction

Student engagement is a pivotal aspect of academic success, reflecting the extent to which students are involved and interested in their learning process (Newmann, 1992). This engagement encompasses students' active efforts to comprehend and master academic content (Buckley, 2018; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Zepke, 2014; Zepke & Leach, 2010). In second language (L2) writing research, student engagement with teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) is recognized as a crucial component, manifested through emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses to instructors' feedback (Ellis, 2010).

Using teacher WCF, a prevalent method in writing instruction (Ferris, 2010), significantly influences students' language proficiency. The link between students' engagement levels and teacher feedback has garnered attention in higher education and L2 writing research, emphasizing its potential to enhance students' learning outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004). Despite decades of scholarly emphasis on the efficacy of feedback in L2 writing development (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Lee, 2020; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022), the role of student engagement in maximizing the benefits of teacher feedback remains underexplored (Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng et al., 2023). An inclusive investigation into their interaction is warranted since student engagement encompasses affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions in response to feedback (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

Previous studies, such as those undertaken by Han and Hyland (2015), Mahfoodh (2017), and Cheng and Liu (2022), have provided valuable insights into how students engage with WCF. However, a gap remains in understanding this engagement across different proficiency levels within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. This gap underlines the necessity of this study, which aims to examine the affective (emotional), behavioral (action-oriented), and cognitive (intellectual) responses of low-proficiency (LP) and high-proficiency (HP) students to WCF, thereby addressing the central research questions:

How do LP and HP students engage affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively with teacher WCF in L2 writing?

The significance of the problem lies in the crucial role of student engagement in optimizing the benefits of teacher feedback, thereby enhancing L2 writing development. By understanding the nuances of student engagement, teachers can tailor feedback strategies to effectively address the diverse needs of students, ultimately fostering a conducive learning environment. Furthermore, investigating student engagement in EFL contexts contributes to the broader discourse on language learning pedagogy, offering insights into effective instructional practices to promote students' language proficiency.

The conceptual framework for this study builds upon Ellis's (2010) categorization of student engagement, which is further refined and expanded by Han and Hyland (2015) and Zheng et al. (2023). This framework systematically examines factors influencing student

engagement with teacher WCF, offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics inherent in L2 writing contexts.

By focusing on the differential engagement patterns of LP and HP students with WCF, this study aims to elucidate the interactions between students with different language proficiency levels and their engagement with feedback. Indeed, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how student engagement can enhance the pedagogical value of teacher feedback in L2 writing instruction. Such insights are crucial for fostering an education milieu that emphasizes the importance of psychological investment in learning and creates positive academic performance and outcomes (Krause, 2005; Newmann, 1992).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

The investigation into student engagement with WCF in L2 writing has been outlined through three primary theoretical frameworks: Sociocultural Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. Each of these theories offers distinct insights into the mechanism of language learning.

Sociocultural theory posits that cognitive development, particularly in human learning, is significantly mediated through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981). Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is central, describing the space where learning is most effective with the aid of more knowledgeable people (Vygotsky, 1978; Frawley, 2013). This theory emphasizes the importance of scaffolding within the ZPD for overcoming cognitive challenges. In L2 writing, scaffolding involves guiding learners to deduce correct forms (Nguyen, 2021). As such, WCF is viewed as an essential scaffolding technique that supports language development, requiring both prompt and concise feedback to promote learner autonomy (Bruner, 1985; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Sharpe, 2008).

Social cognitive theory, as proposed by Bandura (1991), emphasizes the role of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors in learning. This theory introduces the concept of observations, where learning occurs through direct experiences and observing others (Bandura, 1986, 1989). Key elements of observational learning include attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1989). Social cognitive theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the engagement with teacher WCF, highlighting the influence of self-efficacy on learners' motivation and engagement with feedback.

Complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) offers a holistic view of SLA, presenting language learning as a complex system influenced by multiple interacting factors (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). This perspective addresses the limitations of traditional cognitive and sociocultural approaches by emphasizing the co-adaptation and emergence of language learning phenomena. CDST suggests that language, learners, and instructional contexts are interconnected, highlighting the iterative nature of feedback in improving language patterns (Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Student engagement with WCF is multifaceted, incorporating affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Affective engagement relates to learners' emotional reactions to feedback, cognitive engagement to intellectual processing of feedback, and behavioral engagement to actions taken in response to feedback, such as revisions or uptake (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015). The refined framework by Zheng et al. (2023) further categorizes these dimensions into more delicate sub-constructs, providing a comprehensive lens through which to examine student interactions with WCF.

Empirical studies in various learning contexts have shed light on the complex nature of student engagement with WCF. Research has shown the influential role of learner beliefs, experiences, and contextual factors on engagement (Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zheng & Yu, 2018). These studies accentuate the diversity in student engagement patterns, highlighting the need for personalized feedback strategies that consider individual learner differences and the dynamic nature of engagement (Liu, 2021; Tian & Zhou, 2020). Despite the growing body of research, there remains a gap in our understanding of how engagement with WCF evolves over time and across different proficiency levels. This suggests the necessity for further longitudinal and comparative studies in this area.

2.2 Empirical Studies of Student Engagement with WCF

In empirical investigations into student engagement with WCF within Chinese higher education settings, substantial insights have been gained (Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2015; Tian & Zhou, 2020; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng et al., 2023; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Han and Hyland (2015) embarked on a qualitative exploration of college students' engagement, uncovering the complex interplay of their beliefs, experiences, and learning environment context. Zheng and Yu (2018) paid particular attention to low-proficiency learners, identifying a pattern of strong emotional engagement alongside more limited cognitive and behavioral interactions with feedback. Han (2017) shed light on how student beliefs positively influence their engagement, which is especially notable among students with lower achievement levels. Further expanding upon these observations, Zheng et al. (2023) delved into the individual variability in engagement, linking these differences to learners' beliefs and interpersonal dynamics. Studies such as those by Tian and Zhou (2020) have also explored the distinctions of engaging with automated feedback, suggesting the evolving nature of these interactions over time. Issues related to feedback reception have been brought to the forefront by researchers like Liu (2021) and Pan et al. (2023), with others like Yang and Zhang (2023) and Zhang and Mao (2023) observing developmental shifts in engagement patterns. Additionally, research by Kalimantan et al. (2023) on Indonesian university students has further diversified the landscape of studies on engagement with WCF. Despite these valuable contributions, the field still lacks in-depth exploration, particularly in longitudinal and cross-proficiency level research, on student engagement with WCF.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants and Context

The study was conducted at a private university in the Southern part of China, focusing on a Basic English Writing course designed for second-year English majors over a semester. Six female students, aged 19 to 20, were purposively chosen for this study, equally split into HP and LP groups based on their language skills. This purposive selection aimed to examine the differential engagement with teacher WCF among students with varying levels of English proficiency. Each participant had a minimum of ten years of experience in learning English, laying a strong groundwork for evaluating the influence of WCF on their L2 writing abilities.

English writing proficiency among the participants was determined using scores from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Writing Task 2, with results scaled to a maximum of 100 points. The HP group included students who scored 71, 65, and 65.5, demonstrating a superior grasp of writing in English. On the other hand, scores of 40.5, 41.5, and 46 classified the remaining students into the LP group, indicating fundamental proficiency. This classification was instrumental in exploring how students with different skill levels respond to, understand, and are influenced by teacher feedback in their L2 writing endeavors. Furthermore, this segmentation sheds light on potential educational practices and interventions that could foster or improve L2 writing proficiency across different learner groups.

3.2 Research Instruments

A multiple-case study approach was employed to address the research questions, focusing on individual students' engagement with teacher WCF on L2 writing. Data sources included students' initial and revised writing samples and stimulated recall sessions. Writing tasks aligned with the course syllabus were assigned, and teacher WCF was provided through handwritten comments on drafts. Stimulated recall sessions involved participants watching video recordings of their writing process and providing verbal commentary.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection spanned a semester, with participants writing two drafts each for a take-home essay, resulting in 60 texts. The teacher provided WCF on initial drafts, and stimulated recall sessions were conducted within 24 hours of revisions. Data analysis involved text analysis of drafts and WCF in exploring revision operations and behavioral engagement, as well as qualitative analysis of stimulated recall transcriptions to examine affective and cognitive engagement. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through independent analysis and discussions to address discrepancies.

The present study also addressed ethical considerations concerning informed permission, participant anonymity, and beneficence or reciprocity. All participants provided informed consent by signing a consent statement outlining the study's objectives and their voluntary participation, ensuring adherence to ethical research principles. Participant anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms, and additional measures were taken to protect the reputation of the university where the research was conducted. Extraneous personal data was excluded from the data analysis process to uphold anonymity.

4. Results

4.1 Thematic Analysis of Student Engagement

The thematic analysis of student engagement with written corrective feedback (WCF), guided by Zheng et al.'s (2023) framework, delves into the intricate ways students interact with feedback across affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions, each underpinned by specific sub-themes. Affective engagement encapsulates the emotional responses students have towards receiving WCF. This dimension is characterized by feelings, such as motivation, encouragement, being overwhelmed, and happiness, reflecting the immediate emotional impact of feedback. The sub-theme of judgement includes students' personal and moral evaluations made by their teachers. Appreciation, another crucial sub-theme, involves students valuing the feedback's significance and viewing it as helpful, important, and worthy of gratitude. These elements together influence how students emotionally align themselves with the feedback process, impacting their openness and responsiveness to making revisions.

Behavioral engagement focuses on the visible action students take in response to WCF. It includes revision operations, which are direct reactions to feedback, such as making correct revisions, opting not to revise, or incorrectly revising the text. Additionally, it covers the behavioral strategies students employ to improve their learning, like actively searching for the errors mentioned in the feedback or attempting to understand the underlying reasons for their mistakes. This dimension highlights the practical steps students undertake to integrate feedback into their writing practices.

Cognitive engagement examines the intellectual process students engage in while dealing with WCF. This includes the use of learning strategies, where students apply sophisticated, deep, and personalized approaches to address feedback. Students might develop efficient methods to tackle feedback, explore phrases with similar meanings, or rely on basic online dictionaries for alternative word choices. The pursuit of conceptual understanding signifies a move beyond surface knowledge to grasp the foundational grammar rules and concepts underpinning the feedback. Lastly, employing self-regulated strategies, such as maintaining comprehensive checklists and remembering common mistakes from previous feedback, indicates students' efforts to independently monitor and enhance their learning based on WCF.

Together, these themes paint a comprehensive picture of students' multi-layered engagement towards WCF in L2 writing. They highlight the emotional, actionable, and cognitive pathways through which students process, react to, and utilize feedback to foster their writing development, underlining the complexity of feedback dynamics in learning settings.

4.2 Student Engagement with Teacher WCF on L2 Writing

4.2.1 Affective Engagement

This section delves into students' emotional responses to teacher WCF in L2 writing, examining both LP and HP students' affective engagement through students' writing tasks and stimulated recalls.

For the affective sub-theme, LP and HP students exhibited similar emotional responses to teacher WCF, with both groups expressing various sentiments, including curiosity and intrigue. LP students expressed feelings of curiosity and uncertainty. For example, an LP1 student stated that she was experiencing a number of feelings on the teacher's feedback on her writing, and one of the feelings was "a sense of curiosity". Other LP students echoed similar sentiments, such as "I really want to know" and "I am wondering how to make it right". The argument can be seen in the excerpt [1] below.

[1] "I also feel a sense of curiosity and excitement to figure out where exactly my errors are." (LP1)

Similarly, HP students reported emotions like curiosity and motivation. HP1, for instance, expressed being "curious". Others in the HP group also shared similar feelings like "eager" and "motivated and encouraged", as reflected in the excerpt [2] below. These shared emotional responses underscore the importance of recognizing and leveraging students' curiosity for effective instruction across proficiency levels.

[2] "I am interested and eager to learn from my mistakes and improve my language skills." (HP2)

However, differences in emotional engagement between LP and HP students were observed. LP students often felt frustrated and overwhelmed, that is, "I feel frustrated", "I feel overwhelmed", "I don't know", as seen in [3] as an example, possibly due to lower confidence levels. Conversely, HP students exhibited positive, self-driven emotions, indicating higher motivation and confidence, such as being "curious", "motivated", "encouraged", "excited", and "ashamed of their errors", as shown in [4].

[3] "I feel like I've lost because I didn't get the teacher's comment on my writing. However, I really want to know what the comment (circled it) actually means. I feel a bit overwhelmed and unsure when seeing my sentences or phrases reformed." (LP2)

[4] "I am interested and eager to learn from my mistakes and improve my language skills...it makes me feel happy. I feel supported, and it boosts my confidence...I feel happy and motivated because I know that these errors with underlines or circles are relatively minor and can be easily corrected. I see it as an opportunity to improve my overall accuracy." (HP2)

Regarding the judgement sub-theme, both LP and HP students demonstrated confidence in their teacher's feedback, viewing it as an opportunity for growth and self-improvement. As shown in [5]-[7], LP students regarded the teacher's WCF as "a guide" or "a valuable opportunity". Similarly, HP students took the feedback from their teacher as "an opportunity". This shared positive outlook fosters trust, collaboration, and autonomous learning, contributing to continual skill development.

[5] "I trust the feedback and use it as a guide for future writing." (LP1)

[6] "I view the feedback as a valuable opportunity for self-correction and improvement." (LP2)

[7] "I view this comment "repetition" as an opportunity for growth and improvement." (HP2)

However, notable differences emerged in their viewpoints. While LP students generally expressed affirmative attitudes (see excerpt [8]), LP3 questioned the effectiveness and value of WCF, especially regarding the suggestion to "use more authentic expressions" as depicted in [9]. In contrast, HP students constructively embraced corrections, acknowledging them as vital support for continual education, as exemplified in [10].

[8] "I appreciate the clarity and directness of the corrections, understanding that they are meant to improve my overall writing." (LP1)

[9] "It's easy for me to spot my errors with the corrections made by my teacher aside... (However), I struggle to see the value in this comment "use more authentic expressions" from my teacher. I question its effectiveness and wonder if there is other feedback that could better cater to my lower proficiency level." (LP3)

[10] "I appreciate the feedback and use it as a learning tool to correctly understand and apply grammar rules. It helps me become more aware of my mistakes and motivates me to work on them. Personally, I admire this feedback strategy because it helps me see alternative ways to express my ideas more effectively." (HP3)

These differences reflect the impact of students' judgment and language proficiency on their responses to teacher WCF. LP students exhibited a range of attitudes, including skepticism, while HP students generally approached feedback constructively, highlighting the influence of individual judgment and language proficiency on feedback reception.

Concerning the appreciation sub-theme, both LP and HP students appreciated the teacher's dedication and effort in providing corrections, as evidenced in [11] - [12]. These findings align with a study by Afifi et al. in 2023, which suggests that students generally hold favorable opinions about teacher WCF in writing education.

[11] "I like how my teacher pointed out the specific mistakes I made." (LP2)

[12] "I express gratitude for his guidance and take his corrections seriously. I appreciate the effort and expertise of my teacher who

provides me with corrections." (HP2)

LP students value guidance and the indirect feedback approach, emphasizing self-reliance and personal investment in their learning journey while also expressing practical considerations for quick revisions, as depicted in [13]. Conversely, HP students sincerely appreciated personalized guidance and the positive influence of the teacher, viewing corrections as invaluable contributions to their development, as illustrated in [14].

[13] "Getting feedback helps me understand my mistakes and makes me feel like my teacher cares about helping me get better. I like that they give suggestions on how to say things differently. When my teacher points out mistakes and circles them, it makes me feel like I need to take charge of my learning and think really carefully. It makes me want to be more independent and rely on myself when I write." (LP2)

[14] "I really love this feedback strategy because it shows that my teacher genuinely cares about my growth and development. It's like having a supportive teammate cheering me on, creating a positive and encouraging environment to keep improving my writing skills. I appreciate how it helps me better understand grammar rules and enhances my sentence structure. It's such a valuable tool for improving my writing, and I'm grateful to have it." (HP3)

Overall, while LP students expressed mixed emotions and occasional skepticism towards feedback, HP students demonstrated a more positive and motivated engagement, with a deeper understanding and trust in feedback, fostering a growth-oriented mindset towards continuous learning. This nuanced perspective adds valuable insights to our understanding of affective engagement with WCF.

4.2.2 Behavioral Engagement

This section focuses on students' observable behavioral actions and responses when interacting with WCF on their written work. Specifically, qualitative data analysis delves into the sub-themes underpinning the students' behavioral engagement, focusing on revision operations and behavioral operations for learning improvement among LP and HP students.

Regarding revision operations, both LP and HP students demonstrated a proactive approach to revision, making accurate corrections in response to teacher feedback. In the LP group, for example, LP1 stated, "I carefully check the feedback and revise the errors correctly" as reflected in the excerpt [15] below. Similarly, other LP students echoed similar sentiments, such as "I revise it immediately" and "I can get it done correctly". Likewise, HP exhibited an operation to accurate revisions. HP1, for instance, expressed that "my revisions are accurate and in line with the teacher's feedback." in the excerpt [16]. Others in the HP group also shared a similar revision. This similarity suggests that students, regardless of proficiency level, engage confidently with feedback, demonstrating effective revision strategies.

[15] "I carefully check the feedback and revise the errors correctly." (LP1)

[16] "After receiving the feedback, I focus on the red marks and carefully analyze the corrections. I make sure that my revisions are correct and in line with the suggestions my teacher gave me." (HP1)

However, LP students sometimes chose to delete errors or make no changes, indicating challenges with unclear or difficult errors, as depicted in [17] and [18]. LP2 attempted to understand and revise challenging errors based on grammar rules, while LP3 admitted to not fully understanding the corrections and simply copying them without reflection.

[17] "I try to correct and revise the errors...I apply my knowledge of grammar rules and language conventions to make the necessary revisions; however, I have some errors. It's difficult and difficult for me to revise them accurately. In such cases, I have to delete or leave the errors as if I'm unsure of the correct revision." (LP2)

[18] "I simply skim over the corrections without fully understanding the mistakes I made or the correct answers provided. I don't take the time to reflect on why I made those errors or how to avoid them in the future. I just need to copy and paste them. But for the comment underneath, I ignored it and didn't correct it. Honestly, I sometimes ignore these marks." (LP3)

These differences highlight varying levels of behavioral engagement and responsiveness to teacher feedback between LP and HP students, underscoring the challenges LP students face in effectively incorporating feedback for sustained learning and improvement. The distinctiveness aligns with the behavioral engagement patterns reported by Han (2017), Zheng et al. (2023), and Pan et al. (2023), where individual differences contribute to diverse engagement outcomes.

In response to behavioral operations for learning improvement, both LP and HP students demonstrated a commitment to understanding and incorporating feedback, as reflected in their conscientious efforts to review and comprehend the meaning of corrections, such as "I carefully review each correction and try to understand" (LP1) and "I take time to think about the feedback" (HP3) in the excerpts [19] and [20]. This shared commitment underscores the importance of active engagement in learning to enhance writing skills. The commitment demonstrated by both groups in conscientiously reviewing, understanding, and incorporating feedback aligns with the studies from Qi and Lapkin (2001) and Sachs and Polio (2007) that participation is crucial for effective learning.

[19] "I carefully review each correction and try to understand." (LP1)

[20] "I take time to think about the feedback and how it connects to my writing...I revise my writing carefully." (HP3)

However, differences emerged in the approach to behavioral operations for learning improvement between LP and HP students. LP students exhibited varied levels of engagement, with some adopting passive strategies such as merely accepting changes without active

learning, as depicted in [21]-[23]. To elaborate further, while LP1 and LP2 actively embraced corrections and explored supplementary resources by using "a notebook to write down the corrections" or "grammar books and online resources", LP3 adopted a more passive stance, merely skimming over corrections and "simply accept the changes". In contrast, HP students consistently demonstrated proactive and positive methods to enhance language skills through WCF, actively participating in understanding errors, applying corrections promptly, and engaging in reflective revision processes, as illustrated in [24].

[21] "I have a notebook to write down the corrections." (LP1)

[22] "I scan through the corrections, paying close attention to the grammatical issues that were pointed out. To further enhance my understanding and practice, I explore additional resources such as grammar books, online resources, or language learning websites." (LP2)

[23] "I go through the feedback when I receive it, just like that. It is a routine in my understanding. I just simply accept the changes made by the teacher without actively learning from them." (LP3)

[24] "I use the examples given in my work, trying out different ways of saying things and changing structures...I watch English movies or TV series, listen to English music, and read English books or articles." (HP2)

In summary, both LP and HP students actively pursued strategies for learning improvement, showing positive responses to teacher feedback through the active correction of errors. However, nuanced differences emerged in the consistency and approach of engagement. This dichotomy underscores the impact of individual factors and proficiency levels on student engagement with teacher WCF, highlighting the complex interplay of factors shaping behavioral engagement in response to feedback.

4.2.3 Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement was explored through learning strategies, conceptual understanding, and self-regulation (Zheng et al., 2023). Both groups shared a commitment to language improvement. Still, variances in the depth and breadth of engagement revealed distinctions across these three sub-themes: Learning strategies, conceptual understanding, and self-regulated strategies.

For learning strategies, LP and HP students demonstrated commitment to addressing teacher feedback through various approaches. LP students employed meticulous error review, reflective thinking, and reliance on online resources. For example, LP1 engaged in thoughtful reflection and consulted online grammar apps or dictionaries (see excerpt [25]). Similarly, LP2 and LP3 demonstrated comparable strategies.

[25] "I check my writing and the highlighted errors. I think about why those errors occurred and how I can avoid making them in the future. Sometimes I look up online grammar apps or dictionaries for help." (LP1)

HP students are also committed to refining language proficiency through learning strategies. They analyzed teacher corrections meticulously and sought additional resources such as grammar guides and writing textbooks. HP1 emphasized attention to changes and utilization of online resources, a sentiment echoed by HP2 and HP3 (see excerpt [26]).

[26] "I analyze the corrections made by my teacher and compare them to my original work. I also seek additional resources, such as grammar guides or writing textbooks, to deepen my knowledge on specific language aspects." (HP2)

However, differences emerged in the depth and variety of strategies employed. LP students commonly focused on immediate error correction, relying on familiar strategies such as regular practice opportunities. For instance, LP1 (excerpt [27]) emphasized error correction through meticulous review and reflective thinking, relying on known strategies like online resource dependence. LP2 and LP3 also demonstrated immediate correction efforts, with LP3 specifically highlighting the use of online grammar apps and dictionaries for quick reference ([28]).

[27] "I carefully review each correction and try to understand the specific grammatical errors or superficial issues that were pointed out...I look up online grammar apps or dictionaries for help." (LP1)

[28] "My trick is to use less unfamiliar vocabulary or sentences to decrease the number of errors next time. I try to fix the mistake quickly and get it done. I sometimes ask my classmate or check the apps on my phone if it is really difficult for me to revise." (LP3)

In contrast, HP students exhibited a more comprehensive and varied set of strategies to enhance their language skills. For example, HP1 not only focused on error correction but also utilized memory aids and engaged in thorough comparisons of teacher corrections with the original work ([29]). HP2 displayed diverse activities, including extensive reading, showcasing a broader approach to language enhancement ([30]). HP3's learning strategies involved analyzing original and reformulated sentences for specific changes, examining patterns, and actively engaging in extensive reading ([31]).

[29] "Rather than focusing solely on surface knowledge, I have a deep desire to understand the underlying concepts of the language...I also employ memory aids, note-taking techniques, and self-quizzing methods to reinforce my learning." (HP1)

[30] "I read good writings to see how writers avoid saying the same things over and over and make their writing clear. I also practice using different words and changing my sentences to make my language more varied and clearer. I watch English movies or TV series, listen to English music, and read English books or articles to help me use English naturally to eliminate these mistakes in my writing." (HP2)

[31] "I compare the original sentences with the reformulated ones to understand the specific changes made and the impact on clarity and coherence. I also carefully examine the patterns and trends in the reformulated sentences to identify common errors and areas for improvement. I actively read a lot to make my language skills better." (HP3)

This contrast underscores that LP students primarily concentrated on error correction. In contrast, HP students tended to employ more sophisticated learning techniques, emphasizing the importance of diverse learning methods beyond error correction.

In response to the conceptual understanding sub-theme, LP and HP students shared a commitment to grasping language concepts. LP students actively seek understanding through correction and comprehension of language mistakes (see excerpt [32]). Similarly, HP students prioritize conceptual clarity, utilizing resources for deeper understanding (see excerpt [33]). This parallels Mahfoodh's (2017) findings, underscoring a universal dedication to foundational language principles among students, regardless of proficiency levels.

[32] "I use resources...to deepen my understanding of ..." (LP1)

[33] "I try to make it clear by using...I want to understand...for my future writing." (HP3)

Differences emerged in how LP and HP students explored language concepts and sought understanding independently. LP students exhibited varied approaches, with LP1 being proactive in utilizing resources like grammar books and learning apps ([34]), while LP2 showed the reflective analysis of corrections to grasp underlying concepts ([35]). However, LP3 struggled with deeper analysis, relying more on surface-level comprehension and external assistance ([36]). In contrast, the HP group demonstrated advanced and independent approaches. HP1 considered underlying grammar rules and stylistic elements in feedback ([37]), HP2 sought a comprehensive understanding of language principles ([38]), and HP3 engaged extensively with various resources and exercises to deepen comprehension ([39]).

[34] "I use resources, such as grammar books and English learning apps, to deepen my understanding of the grammar rules and writing conventions related to the highlighted errors." (LP1)

[35] "To deepen my understanding of the corrections, I take the time to analyze and reflect on them...This way, I can grasp the underlying concepts and apply them correctly in future writing." (LP2)

[36] "I don't fully understand them sometimes. I feel overwhelmed by the language learning process and focus more on surface-level understanding rather than digging deeper into the underlying meaning. I use grammar books or ask my classmates to seek understanding if the errors are difficult for me to revise." (LP3)

[37] "Looking at the teacher's feedback, I think about the underlying grammar rules, sentence structures, and stylistic elements that contribute to the improved clarity and effectiveness of my writing. I carefully analyze the corrections made by the teacher, paying attention to the reasons behind them." (HP1)

[38] "I seek to understand the grammatical rules or language principles that govern them. This helps me develop a more comprehensive understanding of the language and enables me to apply the corrections in a broader context." (HP2)

[39] "I take the time to explore the underlying principles and rules behind grammar structures. I consult language references, textbooks, and language learning apps to deepen my understanding of these concepts. I do exercises and activities given by my teacher in the writing class. I make sure to really understand the language corrections by looking into the concepts and rules behind them. This means I explore different ways to express things, study grammar rules, and practice in real situations to make my writing clearer." (HP3)

For self-regulated strategies, both LP and HP students demonstrated self-regulated strategies, including goal-setting and active engagement in the improvement process. LP students showed dedication to setting clear objectives, as indicated by statements such as "I aim to" (LP1) and "My main goal is to..." (LP3). These students actively reminded themselves of their learning objectives and employed strategic planning to address challenges in L2 writing and handling teacher WCF, as shown in the excerpt [40].

[40] "My main goal is to..." (LP3)

Similarly, HP students exhibited a shared commitment to self-regulation through goal-setting and planning strategies. Statements such as "regularly reflect" (HP1) and "set specific goals" (HP2) highlighted their meticulous approach to continuous improvement, as illustrated in the excerpt [41]. Additionally, HP3 emphasized breaking down writing tasks into smaller, manageable steps and allocating specific time for each aspect ([42]). The convergence between LP and HP students highlights their active engagement in self-regulated strategies, particularly in goal-setting and strategic planning, regardless of performance levels.

[41] "I set specific goals for myself, both short-term and long-term, and create a study plan to achieve them." (HP2)

[42] "I break down my writing tasks into smaller, manageable steps and arrange specific time for each aspect." (HP3)

While both groups engaged in self-regulation, the distinction lies in the depth of engagement with meta-cognitive strategies. LP individuals tended to focus more narrowly on cognitive strategies and immediate improvement goals. LP1 set specific improvement goals based on identified errors, LP2 aimed for gradual improvement while acknowledging mistakes as part of the learning process, and LP3 prioritized task efficiency ([43]-[45]).

[43] "I set specific goals for improvement based on the highlighted errors. These goals include reducing the frequency of specific

errors and improving the overall clarity and coherence of my writing." (LP1)

[44] "I prefer to focus on the errors that I can confidently fix and aim for gradual improvement over time. I remind myself that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process" (LP2)

[45] "I know I lack the self-discipline. My main goal is to save time and complete the task efficiently." (LP3)

In contrast, HP individuals demonstrated a more comprehensive engagement with both cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. HP1 engaged in reflective practices, setting specific improvement goals and comparing revised sentences to previous versions. HP2 employed regular progress monitoring, analyzing strengths and weaknesses, and managing their learning. HP3 reviewed previous writing pieces, set specific goals, reflected on mistakes, and monitored progress, showcasing a nuanced understanding of writing and language use ([46]-[48]).

[46] "I regularly reflect on my writing performance and set specific goals for improvement. When I work on my writing, I like to look back and think about how I did. After I fix things, I check my new sentence against the old one to see if it's better." (HP1)

[47] "I monitor my progress regularly and adjust my learning strategies accordingly. I analyze my strengths and weaknesses in writing and identify areas that require further attention. I try to manage my learning." (HP2)

[48] "I review my previous writing pieces and identify areas for improvement. I set specific goals for myself, such as improving sentence structure or reducing grammatical errors, and monitor my progress. I also reflect on my own writing mistakes and use this feedback as a guide to avoid similar errors in the future. I regularly think about my writing and language use, figuring out where I can do better." (HP3)

In summary, both LP and HP students exhibit similarities and differences in their cognitive engagement, particularly in using learning strategies, seeking conceptual understanding, and employing self-regulated strategies. While both groups are committed to addressing teacher feedback, HP students tend to employ more sophisticated approaches. Additionally, HP students show a more advanced and independent approach to seeking conceptual understanding and self-regulated learning. These differences emphasize the need for differentiated teaching strategies.

5. Discussion

This study investigated student engagement with teacher WCF in L2 writing, revealing dynamics across both LP and HP students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. An analysis illuminated consistencies and inconsistencies in engagement across the two groups. These findings significantly contribute to our understanding of the pedagogical dynamics involved in L2 writing instruction, highlighting the idiosyncratic needs of LP and HP students. A key insight from this research is the presence of curiosity and motivation across both student groups, underscoring the pivotal role of affective engagement in the feedback process. This aligns with Liu (2021), who emphasized the diversity and impact of students' emotional responses on their engagement and subsequent learning outcomes. The observed emotional disparities—LP students experiencing frustration versus HP students showing confidence and gratitude—point to the crucial interplay between language proficiency and affective responses to feedback. These findings suggest that feedback practices need to be emotionally sensitive, offering encouragement and constructive critique in a manner that is accessible and affirming to all students, thereby potentially mitigating frustration and enhancing motivation among LP learners (Lee, 2008; Mahfoodh, 2017).

On behavioral engagement, the distinct ways LP and HP students process and act upon WCF highlight the importance of tailored feedback strategies. For LP students, the challenge of interpreting unclear feedback necessitates a pedagogical approach that emphasizes clarity and specificity, enabling these learners to engage more effectively with the corrective process. Conversely, the reflective practices embraced by HP students suggest that feedback that challenges and prompts deeper cognitive engagement can be particularly beneficial for those with higher proficiency levels, supporting the findings of Zheng & Yu (2018) regarding the positive correlation between perceived feedback utility and student engagement. This differentiation in feedback processing underscores the need for adaptive feedback mechanisms that cater to students' diverse behavioral engagement patterns.

Cognitively, the study sheds light on the sophisticated strategies employed by HP students in response to WCF, such as seeking a deeper understanding of feedback content and employing self-regulation techniques. Encouraging similar cognitive engagement among LP students might involve structured guidance on interpreting and utilizing feedback, possibly through instructional modeling or classroom discussions that explain the feedback process. This approach aligns with suggestions from Zheng et al. (2023) and Zhang & Hyland (2022), who advocate for feedback practices that foster cognitive engagement, thereby enhancing students' ability to apply feedback constructively.

These findings are further accounted for by integrating theoretical frameworks such as sociocultural, social cognitive, and complex dynamic systems theories. These perspectives offer valuable lenses through which to understand the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement with WCF. For example, sociocultural theory underscores the importance of aligning feedback with students' ZPD, ensuring that feedback is both challenging and within reach of students' current abilities (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, social cognitive theory highlights the role of self-efficacy in shaping students' engagement with feedback, suggesting that feedback strategies should aim to bolster students' confidence in their abilities to improve (Bandura, 1986).

6. Conclusion

This research probes into the engagement of Chinese private college students with teacher WCF in L2 writing, with a focus on the differences between LP and HP students. Through a detailed examination of five writing tasks over a 16-week course, it investigates how students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses to WCF interplay with their language acquisition process. The study involves six EFL sophomores, evenly split between LP and HP levels, utilizing methodologies such as task analysis and stimulated recall sessions to gather insights.

The current findings accentuate the multifaceted nature of student engagement, revealing that both LP and HP students exhibit curiosity and motivation. However, LP students sometimes experience frustration due to challenges with unclear errors. In contrast, HP students tend to engage in more reflective practices, indicating a deeper level of engagement. The study links these explanations to three theoretical paradigms: sociocultural theory, social cognitive theory, and complex dynamic systems theory, providing a rich framework for understanding the dynamics at play.

7. Implications

The intricacies of student engagement with WCF in L2 writing underscore the necessity of a comprehensive approach transcending mere content correction. The emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of engagement are pivotal in how students perceive, process, and act upon feedback, influencing their overall learning trajectory. By methodically tailoring feedback to cater to the diverse needs of students—acknowledging the emotional challenges faced by LP students, the behavioral distinctions in their engagement with feedback, and the cognitive strategies employed by HP students—teachers can enhance the efficacy of feedback as a pedagogical tool. Such a differentiated approach not only elevates students' writing skills but also cultivates a learning environment that is genuinely inclusive and supportive. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a feedback culture that improves language proficiencies and nurtures confident, self-regulated learners equipped to navigate the complexities of language learning with resilience and determination.

8. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

While the research provides significant insights into how students of varying language proficiencies engage with WCF in L2 writing, it faces certain constraints that merit attention. The narrow participant pool, comprising only Chinese EFL sophomores from a single private institution, potentially restricts the applicability of the study's inferences to broader and more diverse groups. This particular focus prompts questions about the relevance of the findings for students from diverse cultural settings and educational backgrounds. Moreover, the dependence on self-reported data, including stimulated recall sessions, may introduce subjective biases influenced by the students' interpretations and the accuracy of their recalls. Despite its comprehensiveness, the research methodology might not fully capture the fluid and changing nature of how students engage with feedback over time, indicating the potential value of longitudinal research to observe engagement evolution throughout the language learning process.

Additionally, the emphasis on qualitative data analysis of writing skill improvement leaves a gap in understanding the direct impact of WCF on language proficiency. Future studies addressing these gaps could deepen our comprehension of how WCF influences student engagement and help develop more tailored teaching strategies for L2 writing education. Prospective research should aim to broaden the scope of participants, utilize mixed-methods approaches, and include measures of engagement in real-time to foster a more holistic view of student interactions with feedback, thereby enriching the discourse on language learning pedagogy and identifying effective feedback mechanisms to boost language proficiency and student involvement in EFL settings

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the critical need for feedback practices in L2 writing instruction sensitive to student engagement's affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. By adopting feedback strategies that are informed by an understanding of these dimensions—and the theoretical underpinnings of language learning—teachers can more effectively support students of varying proficiencies in their language development rides. Future research in this area should aim to further elucidate the complex dynamics of feedback engagement, exploring longitudinal changes in student responses to WCF and the impact of diverse feedback types across different educational contexts.

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Authors' contributions

Both Dr. Apisak Sukying and Yilin Jiang were responsible for study design and data analysis. Yilin Jiang mainly handled the literature review and data collection. Dr. Apisak Sukying provided ongoing guidance and consultation throughout the entire research process. Both Dr. Apisak Sukying and Yilin Jiang jointly analyzed the data, interpreted and discussed the findings. Yilin Jiang drafted the manuscript and Dr. Apisak Sukying revised it. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript. The two authors have contributed equally to the study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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