A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF EFL WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

İhsan ÜNALDI

Gaziantep Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü Gaziantep/TURKEY

Email: ihsanunaldi@gmail.com

Abstract: This study focuses on the qualitative aspects of written corrective feedback provided by Turkish teachers of English as a foreign language. The participants were 171 teachers working at state schools in Turkey. The participants were provided with an essay written by a B1 level 20-year-old Turkish EFL learner. They were asked to evaluate the essay and write feedback to the learner. The results were analyzed through an inductive approach; the themes and recurring ideas were watched for without any predetermined concepts or categories. The results revealed that the feedback given to the learner varied to certain extents; a number of categories emerged during the analysis. However, it was concluded that the expectations of EFL teachers from a written text in English focused dominantly on grammatical accuracy.

Keywords: EF, Feedback, EFL Analysis

Introduction

The role of classroom interaction in second and foreign language (henceforth L2) development has been studied from different aspects. Some of these studies accept that L2 interaction includes corrective feedback (henceforth CF) in response to learners' ungrammatical utterances to make them aware of the difference between incorrect and correct L2 forms in which way learners are oriented to modify their ungrammatical utterances (Gass & Lewis, 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Long, 1991; Mackey, 2006;).

The impact of CF in L2 has been one of the mostly discussed topics in language teaching environments and received much attention. It has become a highly controversial issue by playing a head role in language acquisition (Vries, Cucchiarini, Hout & Strik, 2010;). According to Furnborough and Truman (2009), feedback requires "a gap between what has been learned and the target competence of the learners, and the efforts undertaken to bridge these gaps." CF is defined as a teacher's response providing "comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997), as "a pedagogical technique teachers use to draw attention to students' erroneous utterances, and which may result in learners' modified output" (Suzuki, 2004), as "information from any source regarding the learner's L2 performance in order to stimulate acquisition" (Cornillie et al., 2012). Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) identify CF as "a response to a learner's utterance that contains error". The responses can include (a) "an indication that an error has been committed", (b) "provision of the correct target language form", or (c) "metalinguistic information about the nature of the error", or "any combination of these" (Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006, p. 340).

According to Ellis (2013), there are two reasons of CF getting too much attention. Firstly, there is an important place of grammatical correctness in language pedagogy; and secondly, negative evidence has a role in second language acquisition whether accepted or not because the study of CF in second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) allows for "an evaluation of common pedagogical claims about whether, when and how to correct learners' errors" (Ellis, 2013). Chaudron (1988) constructs another way to define CF by making it clear that the term CF may correspond to different meanings. For example, the term "treatment of error" identifies "any teacher behaviour following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error" by making "to elicit a revised student response" the aim of the correction (p. 150). In his view, if "the true" correction is managed, the learner's interlanguage rule is qualified, and "the error is eliminated from further production" (p. 150). Lightbown and Spada (1999) define CF as:

"Any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect. This includes various responses that the learners receive. When a language learner says, 'He go to school

every day', corrective feedback can be explicit, for example, 'no, you should say goes, not go' or implicit 'yes he goes to school every day', and may or may not include metalinguistic information, for example, 'Don't forget to make the verb agree with the subject'". (p. 171-172)

The term of CF is used in the field of language teaching and the term of negative evidence is used in language acquisition (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Fanselow,1977; Lochtman, 2002; Schachter, 1991; Sheen, 2004; White, 1996). Some psychologists situated the issue within the discussion of negative feedback. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Gass, 1997; Schachter, 1991). In a more comprehensive view feedback can be categorized as positive evidence and negative evidence as opportunities to "perceive the differences between output and input by means of a negotiation of meaning" (Long, 1996). Positive evidence is defined as "providing the learners with models of what is grammatical and acceptable in the target language", and negative evidence is defined as "providing the learners with direct or indirect information about what is unacceptable" (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, 1996; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993; Williams, 1999; Williams & Evans, 1998). According to Long (1996), this information may be:

"Explicit (e.g., grammatical explanation or overt error correction) or implicit (e.g., failure to understand, incidental error correction in a response, such as a confirmation check, which reformulates the learners' utterance without interrupting the flow of the conversation) — in which case, the negative feedback simultaneously provides additional positive evidence — and perhaps also the absence of the items in the input." (p. 413)

Types of CF

Baleghizadeh and Gordani (2012) emphasize that deciding on the right CF type, which is an important pedagogical issue, requires "different amounts of time and teaching skill." Various types of CF exist, each with its own appropriate uses. Bitchener et al., (2005) identified three types of CF: direct, indirect, and metalinguistic. In direct CF teacher provides "the correct linguistic form through the deletion of an unnecessary word, addition of a necessary one, or substitution of an incorrect word with a correct one" (Ferris 2006: p. 82). Since it does not require processing, direct CF may be more beneficial for low proficiency students (Asassfeh, 2013). If the teacher does not provide the correction and just indicates to the learner that there is an error, s/he uses indirect CF. It can lead to long-term learning contrary to direct CF because it generates learner reflection and in-depth processing. The third CF type is metalinguistic CF which can be implemented in two ways (a)" providing a label or code" (e.g., *sp* for spelling, *prep* for preposition, etc.) or (b) "providing comments about each error the learner has made" (Bitchener et al., 2005). Direct CF (just underlining and labelling errors by type) is less time-consuming for teachers; however, "holding student-teacher conferences on errors will necessarily call for sufficient metalinguistic knowledge possessed by students as well as teachers" (Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012).

Lyster and Ranta (1997) identified six categories of CF: (1) *Explicit correction*: "any feedback technique that involves a teacher simply providing a student with the correct answer"; (2) *Recast*: "a more implicit feedback technique that involves the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error"; (3) *Clarification request*: "feedback type in which the teacher asks a question indicating to the student that there is a problem with the language utterance"; (4) *Repetition*: "the type of the feedback that involves a teacher repeating wrong utterance highlighting it with intonation"; (5) *Metalinguistic feedback*: "involves a teacher making comments or indicating to the student that there is an error in the language output (e.g., Can you find an error?)"; (6) *Elicitation*: "a feedback type when teachers ask for completion of their own sentence by pausing and allowing students to correct themselves; they may also ask questions to elicit correct form and help students to reformulate an ill-formed utterance" (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). However, Darabad (2013) asserts that "using metalinguistic explanations as CF interferes the flow of communicative interaction and treats language as an object with focusing on the forms." *Focused* and *unfocused CF* is another way of providing correction in the classroom setting. The former refers to the "intensive corrective feedback that repeatedly targets one or a very limited number of linguistic features"; unfocused CF is "extensive corrective feedback that targets a range of grammatical structures" (Sheen, 2011).

In an observational study, Lyster and Ranta (1997) concluded that recasts were the most common type of CF used by the teachers, which is in line with the study conducted by Lyster (2004) who asserted that recasts provide learners with negative evidence. According to Storch's (2010) study, the most frequent feedback technique was explicit correction (49%), and elicitation was the second one (19%) used by L2 teachers. Ashwell (2000) found that L2 learners who received feedback in the form of underlined or circled grammatical, lexical, or mechanical errors as well as content-oriented comments in their drafts benefitted from CF, and he revealed that form-oriented CF was more beneficial than content-oriented CF. However,

Fathman and Walley (1990) found that form-oriented CF and content-oriented CF were equally effective on the writing of L2 writers. In a study Treglia (2009) states that no matter which type of feedback is provided, students understood and were able to address corrections, which showed that students benefited from the CF.

Results of the studies on this subject have been speculative because there are various aspects of CF that need to be taken into consideration and these aspects have been discussed for a considerable amount of time. For example, decades ago, in an attempt to reach a sound understanding about error correction Hendrickson (1978) dealt with five fundamental questions:

1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
3. Which errors should be corrected?
4. How should the learner errors be corrected?
5. Who should correct learner errors?

Each of these issues has been studied from different perspectives and the framework of the current study is related to the third question above. Understanding teacher perspectives on CF is integral to our understanding the place of written corrective feedback (henceforth WCF) in L2 writing pedagogy (Evans et al., 2010). It has been suggested that some teachers regarded all errors as equally serious with an "an error is an error" attitude (Vann Meyer and Lorenz, 1984).

It has also been long argued that no standards exist about error correction of language learners and who should correct these errors and how they should be corrected. As can be understood from the literature review up to this point, English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) teachers' perspectives on WCF is a topic that needs to be furthered studied and discussed. Therefore, the following research question is the main concern of the current study.

RQ: What are the main focuses of written corrective feedback (WCF) provided by Turkish EFL teachers?

A solid answer to this research question will make it clear whether there is a pattern among Turkish EFL teachers' perception concerning language learner errors.

Method
Participants
850 EFL teachers work in the district where the current study was carried out. In total, 230 teachers participated in the study (about 27 %). However, data coming from about 60 of the participants were invalid and removed from the dataset; therefore, data coming from 171 of the participants could be analyzed in the current study. The participants all work at state schools in the same district in Turkey. Their ages vary from 24 to 55 and about 80 % of them are females. In terms of academic level, most of the participants hold BAs, some of them hold MAs and very few of them hold PhDs. Related data are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Academic levels of the participants

Academic level	n	%
BA	142	83.05
MA	24	14.05
PhD	5	2.90
Total	**171**	**100.00**

Data collecting and analysis procedures
The aim of the current project was twofold involving both quantitative and qualitative aspects. The quantitative results of the project were presented previously (Ünaldı, 2016). In the current study, the same question is regarded from a qualitative point of view. An essay which had been written by a Turkish EFL was used as the data collecting tool. The learner was at B1 proficiency level in English and was 20 years old. The essay was written during a 50-minute examination and has 311 words in it. It was chosen among many other learner essays by two experts because it included a wide variety of errors ranging from basic spelling to much more complex syntax errors along with discourse issues. The same essay was handed out to the participants,

the instructions were given and after a week the essays were collected back. In the instruction part the participants were asked to provide a general evaluation and feedback about the essay to the learner who wrote it.

After the sifting procedure as was mentioned above, 171 essays were analyzed through an inductive procedure; a content analysis was carried out. During the analysis process it was noticed that 55 of the participants (32 %) preferred not to give any kind of written feedback or evaluation of any kind; therefore, 116 essays (about 68 %) with feedback or some kind of evaluation were analyzed. Table 3 provides the relevant information.

Table 3. Participants' preferences for providing feedback to the learner

Preference for feedback	*n*	*%*
Preferred to provide feedback	116	68
Preferred not to provide feedback	55	32
Total	**171**	**100**

116 feedback sheets collected from the participants were analyzed through the use of content analysis. In content analysis, qualitative categories are not predetermined but are derived from the data in an inductive manner (Dörnyei, 2007). In other words, the researcher does not have predetermined concepts or categories in the analysis process, s/he watches for categories as they emerge from the collected data. Dörnyei (2007, p. 246) describes the steps involved in the analysis process. First of all, the data gathered has to be transformed into a textual form, but when the data is already in written form this phase may not be applicable. The next step is the initial coding stage. In the process, the texts at hand are read several times in order to familiarize with the content. This phase involves marginal notes, highlighting and labelling. During this procedure, an external code check is recommended; another researcher checks the overlaps in the codes and the texts. The next process is called second level coding, and in this stage a hierarchy of codes is created, and finally the data is interpreted and conclusions are drawn. In the current study very similar procedures were followed in the analysis and interpretation process.

Results and discussion

From the 171 essays collected from the participants, 116 of them preferred to provide a general evaluation of the essay. After the procedures mentioned in the previous part were completed, a number of categories emerged from the data collected. These thematic categories are as follows in order of importance:

1. Grammatical problems
2. Vocabulary related problems
3. Tolerability
4. Cohesion related problems
5. Intelligibility
6. Organizational problems
7. Unnecessary repetitions
8. Thinking in the native language and/or translation

These themes are briefly analyzed below through the use of extracts taken from the participants' feedback. The quotations are direct quotations and no modifications as to the spelling or grammar have been made. The themes are presented in a hierarchical order and the first and the most important theme that emerged from the analysis of the data is grammar related problems. When given a chance to provide feedback to an EFL learner, most of the participants consider grammar as the foremost issue to be dealt with on the learners' side. Some extracts from the feedback sheets are provided below.

Grammatical problems

P165. On the other hand, there are several critical grammatical mistakes that are not expected from a B1 level learner. These mistakes should immediately be corrected.

P146. There are many grammatical mistakes.

P143. …but there is some important grammer mistakes.

P129. The writer has to be careful with spelling and grammar mistakes.

P122. But it could be better. Because there are grammar mistakes and punctuation mistakes.

P119. Of course there are grammar mistakes he should be more careful about grammar mistakes when it written or spoken in formal language.

P100. There are many grammatical mistakes as I underlined.

P50. There aren't grammatical mistakes except from two/three simple ones.

P45. There are so many grammer fails.

Vocabulary related problems was the second most prominent issue according to the results of the qualitative analysis. Many of the participants provided feedback concerning the use of certain vocabulary items, phrases and part-of-speech related issues. Some extracts taken from the dataset can be analyzed below.

Vocabulary related

P154. I think when we choose wrong word or use wrong word, there can be lots of misunderstanding problems.

P153. …using wrong words can cause some misunderstanding problems.

P148. On the other hand, some vocabularies are chosen wrongly.

P101. And some vocabularies aren't choosen correctly.

P81. Wrong word choice is common.

The next theme emerged from the dataset was related to tolerability of the language used in the composition. Many of the participants questioned the tolerability of the composition written by the EFL learner. Some found certain problems tolerable while others dubbed certain errors intolerable even if they are simple. Following are some of the extracts from the feedback sheets provided by the participants.

Being tolerable or not

P166. I think generally this essay can be tolerable because if someone reads this article she / he can understand what the student is writing about.

P164. According to the level of the learner, the grammatical mistakes of the essay are not tolerable an unexpected.

P163. For me there are not too many mistakes those cannot be tolerated.

P151. It is a successful essay. The mistakes are generally tolerable.

P150. I cannot tolerate if someone doesn't write a country name in capital letters.

P139. There are so many simple mistakes that can't be tolerated.

Cohesion related problems was another issue which was found to be noteworthy by the teachers who participated in the current study. Many of the participants provided cohesion related feedback to the EFL learner stating that connections among the sentences are missing. Some example of these feedback are provided below.

Cohesion related

P75. In some parts of the essay, one can have difficulty in understanding the connection among the sentences.

P49. You should use conjunctions effectively because there isn't any connection between your sentences.

P47. No unity and coherence

P36. There is not a coherence due to the lack of connectors, the flow of the essay is disrupted.

In addition to cohesion related issues, in their feedback, a number of the participants mentioned problems about the intelligibility of the essay. Interestingly, the participants stated that the intelligibility of the

composition is intact albeit some problems. Below, some of these intelligibility related comments given to the learner can be analyzed.

> *Comprehensibility*
> P142. This essay gives the main message to the readers.
> P140. Main idea can be understood easily. Topic sentence is clear.
> P98. Although there are some mistakes in this survey, they don't affect the comprehension of it.

Organization related problems were also a common issue in the participants' feedback. Some of the participants found these problems worth mentioning. Some extracts concerning this issue can be found below.

> *Organizational problems*
> P134. There are also important problems with the organization.
> P135. …whereas he has problems with essay organization and unity in content.
> P121. Lacks clear organization of the lay-out.
> P36. The organization is very poor.

Another common point made by the participants was related to the unnecessary repetitions in the learner's essay.   A few of the participants found these repetitions problematic by stating the followings.

> *Unnecessary repetitions*
> P139. …and some of them are repeated in different words but meaning same.
> P113. Same sentences cannot be repeated.
> P109. Some thoughts are repeated unnecessarily.

As the last theme, the effect of the native language of the EFL learner, which is Turkish, emerged from the dataset. Very few of the participants stated that the learner was thinking in Turkish and trying to write in English. Some examples of feedback related to this issue are provided below.

> *Thinking in the native language and translation*
> P145. Most students still think in Turkish. That's why they make so many mistakes.
> P168. Please don't think in Turkish.

To sum up the results concerning the themes that were determined during the qualitative analysis stage, the following graphic in Figure 1 can be analyzed. The themes are in order of quantitative importance.
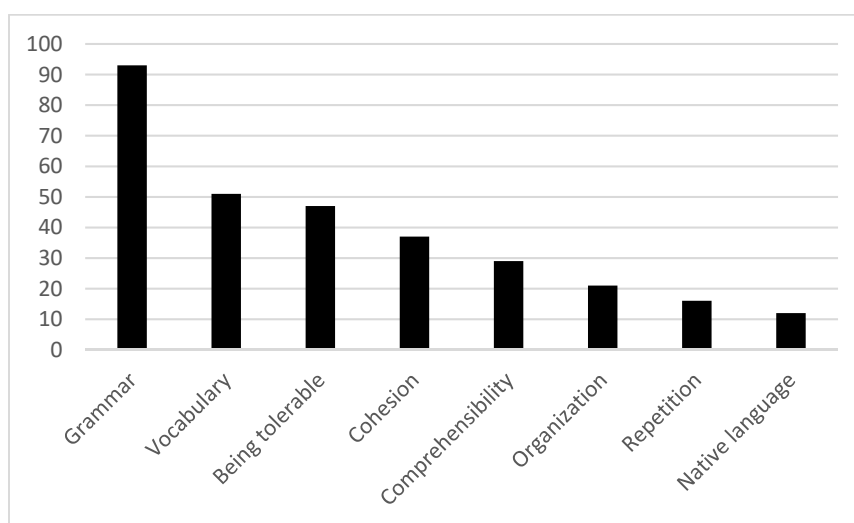

Figure 1. Graphical representation of the themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' feedback

Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' feedback with their percentages. It is obvious from the figure that Grammar is the dominant theme among

others. From the 116 papers over 90 % of them involve some sort of grammatical feedback. About 50 % of these feedback involve points concerning vocabulary and being tolerable or not. The other feedback provided by the participants are about cohesion (about 40 %), comprehensibility (about 30 %), organization (about 20 %), repetition (about 15 %) and about 10 % for the effects of the native language on the learner's essay. It should be born in mind that a feedback provided by the teacher can include a variety of aspects of the essay; therefore, a feedback can focus on grammar and involve other aspects at the same time.

The results of the current study indicated that grammar related issues in written productions of EFL learners actually is the main focus of their teachers, which means that there is integrity and reliability in WCF provided by EFL teachers to some extent. Because nearly all of the instructors (over 90 %) who participated in the study have grammar related CF. However, providing grammatical feedback to learners is a controversial issue. For example, Polio (2012) claims that CF works in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural model of learning, particularly the zone of proximal development, by identifying that CF is a kind of scaffolding since it indicates "a gap between language learners' behavior on their own compared to that performed after receiving support." According to Sampson (2012), with more practice on CF, students may have more control over the target linguistic form. Norris and Ortega (2000) conclude that "focused instructional treatment of any sort is far better than non-intervention." However, Truscott (1996) proposed, theoretically, WCF would disturb the natural development order of SLA, and he supported his opposition to CF by pointing out that the number of the studies investigating CF was not sufficient (1996, 1999, and 2007). He set against CF for different reasons such as the absence of control groups and delayed post-tests or the use of grammar exercises as their only writing tasks. In line with this, Long (1977) criticizes CF by saying that "error correction is unreliable, vague, and ineffective." Krashen (1982) defends that language is acquired unconsciously, so learning it formally by concentrating on formal correction may be useless.

By some approaches, it is predicted that CF has a facilitative role if used in an effective way (Mackey & Goo, 2007; Norris & Ortega, 2000), and these claims like Truscott's   were criticized by the proponents of CF, and they tried to change this opposing perspective (Bitchener 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005, 2008, 2010; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen et al., 2009), although after each attempt, they were criticized severely by Truscott for not being able to demonstrate that error correction has any benefit (Truscott and Hsu, 2008).

However, Ferris (1999) refutes this idea by suggesting that CF can be helpful for language learners if it is "clear, selective, and prioritized," which supports Polio (2012) who stated that "CF could be effective in certain conditions." In response, Truscott (1999) explains that "many questions are left unanswered and calls for language educators to acknowledge the general idea that CF, which is not necessarily a deviant teaching practice, can hardly also be claimed to be a good practice."

Directly related with the framework of the current study, Truscott's (1996) claims that CF does not help to improve writing accuracy by assuming that (a) CF is implemented without being aware of the complex nature of L2 acquisition; (b) we cannot assure of "teachers' and students' willingness to participate in giving and taking CF"; (c) Instead of spending time and effort on applying CF, developing students' interlanguage development can be concentrated on in a much more productive aspect. In order to support his claim, Truscott put "pseudo-learning" forward because it results in the learners' peripheral and superficial acquisition of language forms. Since they may feel nervous, and this may negatively affect the content when they are corrected, they must be encouraged to use simple language, which results in simplified writing (Truscott, 1999). Therefore, he claims WCF is harmful to L2 writing and should be avoided.

There is a general agreement in the previous studies that CF has positive effects on learners' performance (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Fathman & Walley, 1990; Russell & Spada, 2006; Sampson, 2012). Lyster, Lightbown and Spada (1999) disagree with Truscott's claims about CF and self-esteem, and they state that "learners actually expect to receive feedback." In spite of the questions attributed to the effectiveness of CF by Truscott (1996), CF is widely considered effective in promoting awareness in L2 learning (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Sheen, 2007). Bitchener and Knoch (2008) analyzed the CF types, and their research revealed that students receiving at least three CF options were better at writing tasks that the students who did not get any written feedback. Since some structures are pretty difficult for students to learn, it is difficult to learn them when provided only with positive evidence. Therefore, CF is vital to "foster learners' language awareness and the ability to notice gaps in their interlanguage" (Pawlak, 2004). Asassfeh (2013) confirms the positive effect of CF on students' performance, by indicating a statistically significant difference in students' performance prior to and after exposure to CF. For example, Russell and Spada's (2006) meta-analysis of 34 studies indicated an overall positive effect of CF. Another

important research about the WCF was conducted by Ellis et al. (2008). He investigated the Japanese university students' gains in the accuracy of using English articles in narrative writing by concluding that the student groups who received CF were better at the post-test. This conclusion supports the idea of the positive contribution of CF to the development of students' accuracy.

However, it is important for language learners to be aware of expectations of their instructors and ignoring students' expectations might lead to demotivation (Leki, 1991). In the process of WCF, teachers try to modify and correct learner errors with certain assumptions as to what learners are trying to write in the target language, but mismatches between what learners' ideas and those assumed by their teachers are unavoidable (Ferris, 1995; Gass & Selinker, 1994). In addition, Ferris (1995) stated that language learners had a variety of problems understanding WCF provided by their teachers.

According to Burt (1975) language teachers should focus on global errors rather than local errors. Global errors cause communication problems because they affect overall sentence organization like missing word or wrongly placed connectors. Local errors, unlike global errors, do not cause communication problems because they affect single elements in a sentence like grammatical function errors. It is often advised to language practitioners to focus attention on a couple of error types rather than trying to address all kinds of errors available in learners' productions (Harmer, 1983, and Ur, 1996). These approaches might sound quite conclusive, but again there are counterarguments suggesting that WCF provided by the teacher are imprecise and inconsistent Ellis (2009), and he goes on to claim that

> "There is no widely accepted theory of grammatical complexity to help teachers (or researchers) decide which rules are simple and portable or to determine which features are marked. Hard-pressed teachers often do not have the time to ascertain which features are problematic. Even if the careful selection of errors to target were possible in written correction, it would be well-nigh impossible in on-line oral correction" (Ellis, 2009: p. 6).

The debates that have been reviewed so far make it quite clear that we need much more evidence for whether CF improves writers' product quality and the circumstances under which this evidence functions (Asassfeh, 2013). Nevertheless, EFL teachers' obvious focus on grammar in writing has been established with the results of the current study. It might be related to this point that WCF does not seem to be making the language learning process easier. From the learners' perspectives, the prioritization of grammar structures of the target language by their instructors might be pushing the meaning to the background. There are many elements of expedient and successful writing and grammar is actually only one of them. While writing, what is being built is actually a lexical network in which the components are connected to each other through the use of grammar and cohesive devices; therefore, too much focus on only one of these elements is very likely to foster ineffective L2 writing.

Conclusion
The results of the current study indicate that when the issue is giving WCF to EFL learners, EFL teachers' main orientation is dominantly grammar and structure. Vocabulary related problems are also considered important by these teachers. The merits of dwelling on grammatical errors in a given EFL written production could be questioned from many perspectives; however, the results of the current study suggest that EFL teachers' seemingly fixed perceptions on the matter appears to be the most urgent problem to be dealt with.

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