Language Teaching (2021), **54**, 149–151
doi:10.1017/S0261444820000543

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners respond to Icy Lee's 'Teacher written corrective feedback: Less is more'

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In her position article, Lee (2019) compellingly argues for focused written corrective feedback (FWCF) and offers clear guidelines for teachers to shift their feedback approach. As English language teaching practitioners in Chinese universities, we share Lee's view against any unthinking adherence to comprehensive written corrective feedback (CWCF) and advocate principled feedback practice. Our response begins by presenting the common ground between Lee's and our stance, followed by problematizing her 'less-is-more' argument. Finally, following Lee's guidelines, we propose a few context-specific suggestions to help university teachers in mainland China and other contexts better implement FWCF.

We strongly agree with Lee (2019, p. 529) that FWCF is much less overwhelming for students, both emotionally and cognitively. The emotional consequences of CWCF are best illustrated by a striking moment during Han's first year of teaching writing. Having received his paper awash with red ink, a low-intermediate sophomore hesitantly approached Han, mumbling, 'Teacher, is there anything good in my essay?' This experience serves as a wake-up call: even a well-meant CWCF can be poorly received. We also share Lee's view that CWCF decreases students' attention. We often find recurring errors in the revised draft even in the presence of obvious corrections. We later learned that some written corrective feedback (WCF) was overlooked simply because there was too much feedback. This experience exemplifies Lee's (2019, p. 528) argument that 'telling students all the errors they have made by giving CWCF is one thing, but students learning from it and avoiding error recurrence is quite another'.

We also share Lee's view that FWCF engages students more deeply because this feedback approach aligns better with pre-writing instruction and post-writing reinforcement activities. While our students generally welcome feedback, many still hold that WCF helps to polish the manuscript but does not help improve written accuracy in the long term because feedback is often provided incrementally without timely consolidation and reinforcement. With a clear linguistic focus, FWCF enables teachers to integrate feedback into instruction so that 'the points made through explicit teaching [can be] picked up and reinforced by written feedback and then recycled in both peer and student-teacher oral interactions' (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 86). In fact, having long been exposed to highly structured English instruction throughout their school years, our university students, regardless of their L2 proficiency, often anticipate a strong link between feedback and instruction. They also use teacher instruction to comprehend feedback. One of Han's colleagues explained sentence fragments to her class before assigning an essay and later provided feedback on this error category. Although some students did not fully grasp the underlying rules of fragments, they still rephrased the problematic sentence because they vaguely remembered the teacher had mentioned this problem in class. When this alignment between teacher instruction and feedback is missing, students are easily confused and less motivated to engage with feedback.

Among Lee's potent refutations of impediments to adopting FWCF, we particularly appreciate the rebuttal of the deep-seated traditional belief that 'the more feedback, the better the teacher'. Lee (2019, pp. 530–531) convincingly argued that 'the 'better' teacher should be the one who provides quality

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000543 Published online by Cambridge University Press

WCF' and articulated the criteria of quality WCF – focused, purposeful, motivating, and facilitative. In our opinion, 'purposeful' WCF should 'help students become independent in self-editing' (Lee, 2019, p. 530) rather than spoon-feed students with what they need to pass a local assignment or a course. Providing purposeful WCF is a pressing task for university English teachers in mainland China and other contexts as most college freshmen have been long exposed to teacher-driven, assessment-oriented teaching and learning, whereas university students are expected to be autonomous and self-regulating. If we continue to provide CWCF to university students, students may be even less likely to become independent or autonomous writers.

Despite our agreement with Lee's proposal, we still have a few concerns about implementing FWCF in our teaching. While we agree with Lee that FWCF requires teachers to 'work hard on other areas', such as content and organization issues in student writing and planning pre- and post-writing instructions, our experience is that FWCF itself is no less easy to implement. To make FWCF gradual and contingent on students' developmental level (Lee, 2019, p. 529), teachers need to make numerous decisions in advance and, ideally, as Lee suggests, in collaboration with colleagues. The realistic, thorny questions to be addressed include whether the scope of FWCF received by students in the same class be the same or individualized and whether the scope should be decided from the top down or the bottom up. While CWCF is exhausting and draining due to its tedious, repetitive nature, carefully and purposefully planning FWCF can be much more cognitively and socially demanding for teachers.

Another overlooked challenge at the implementation stage of FWCF is that written accuracy cannot be easily separated from content development and textual organization. This is especially the case when lexical errors and sentence structure errors occur. Li and her co-teachers once tried to focus on verb tenses when teaching low-proficiency students, but the teachers later became frustrated because students' intended meaning was so frequently blurred or twisted with a wide range of linguistic errors coming into play, e.g., articles, pronouns, prepositions, word choice, and run-on sentences. It was not uncommon for us to temporarily expand the range of FWCF just to help students clarify their meaning, either locally or globally; otherwise, important writing issues with respect to content and organization would be left unaddressed. However, in this case, the consistency of FWCF may suffer. This dilemma was not covered in Lee's paper, and we look forward to future investigations into this matter.

These constant decision-making processes also set a high requirement on teachers' 'knowledge of effective feedback principles' and their knowledge in practice (Lee, 2019, p. 533). Regrettably, many English writing teachers in mainland China or other contexts do not work in well-resourced institutions and/or have received inadequate training regarding second language (L2) writing pedagogy. These teachers may consider planning and offering principled FWCF quite intimidating. It is therefore likely that teachers hastily choose one or two error categories without fully considering writing tasks, students' developmental levels, reinforcement activities, and L2 writing instruction. However, the beauty of FWCF lies not only in being focused or selective (see the distinction made by Li & Vuono 2019, p. 100), but also in being principled and planned. If teachers simply intend to provide less WCF and haphazardly or intuitively provide FWCF without careful planning, this random FWCF may not be better than CWCF.

Towards the end of her article, Lee provides clear and useful guidelines for teachers to implement FWCF. However, due to the concerns mentioned, teachers in mainland Chinese universities and other similar contexts may need to use additional strategies to successfully implement FWCF. Instead of diagnosing students' error patterns and error rates manually, we encourage our colleagues to utilize automatic writing evaluation systems to enhance accuracy and to save time. Second, due to limited class time and a lack of vertically organized English courses for university non-English majors, teachers can assign shorter but more frequent writing tasks so that FWCF can be provided gradually. Third, to encourage students to take greater responsibility for their own written accuracy, teachers can assign more authentic writing tasks, such as writing and posting a comment, a blog, or a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000543 Published online by Cambridge University Press

movie review accessible to the general public. In this case, even if FWCF is provided, students will be more motivated to carefully edit the entire manuscript.

Having witnessed both students and teachers bogged down in CWCF, we join Lee (2019) in advocating principled, well-planned FWCF. In one of her earlier articles expressing a similar tenet, Lee (2011, p. 377) called for teachers to 'work smarter, not work harder'. However, we believe teachers need to work both smarter and harder to truly reap the benefits of FWCF. Moreover, instead of being intimidated, we should take this feedback paradigm shift as a learning opportunity to enhance our own feedback literacy to make well-informed, deeply contextualized decisions to foster students' autonomy in English-as-a-foreign-language classrooms.

Acknowledgement. We sincerely thank Dr Graeme Porte for inviting us to be part of this meaningful dialogue with Professor Icy Lee. Our work is supported by China National Social Science Fund (grant number 19CYY052).

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Cite this article: Li, Y., & Han, Y. (2021). Practitioners respond to Icy Lee's 'Teacher written corrective feedback: Less is more'. *Language Teaching*, *54*(1), 149–151. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000543

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