

# Cracking the Correction Code

Improving Student Writing  
in the Second Language Classroom  
and Beyond

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**Cracking the Correction Code:**

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and Beyond

by Michael C. Reyes & Francesca Fiore.

First Edition © 2020

ISBN : 978-1-55339-626-0

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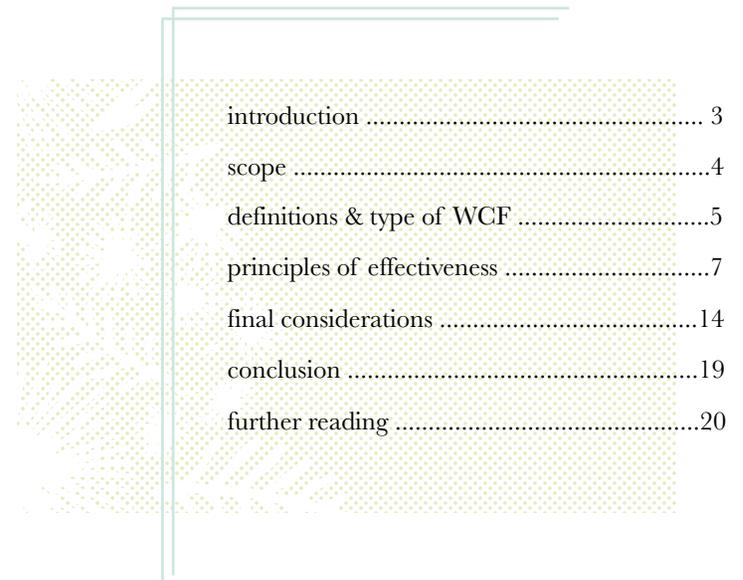
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Printed in Canada

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# introduction.

As any instructor will attest, providing students with feedback on their written assignments is one of the great challenges of the language learning classroom. In part, this is because instructors are never exactly sure how they should respond to the wide range of errors that students can make. Many language instructors would probably agree that they should comment on grammar. But should they also note errors related to vocabulary, spelling, the organization and development of ideas, and content in each piece of writing produced by every student? If an instructor decides to limit their comments strictly to grammar mistakes, should they comment on each and every error? Is there such a thing as too much feedback?

In educational literature, **written corrective feedback (WCF)** refers to the many ways instructors can respond to student language errors in writing. Given that instructors spend a considerable amount of time (and mental energy) providing comments on student writing, it would be immensely helpful to know which kinds of WCF are most effective at improving language accuracy and student writing. Furthermore, since even the best-intentioned instructors work within real-world time constraints, it's also important to identify WCF strategies that are both effective and efficient.

One purpose of this guide is to provide language professors, instructors, and teaching assistants, with an explicit knowledge of the different types of WCF that can be used to respond to student writing. Although instructors come to the language learning classroom with their own preferences and ideas about the effectiveness of different types of feedback (Atmaca, 2016; Köskal et al., 2018), research has shown that instructors have many questions about how to go about implementing WCF (Lee, 2019). This guide has been designed to attend to these widespread questions. After reading this guide, you should be able to describe the range of WCF strategies that instructors can call upon. More importantly, you should also be able to implement a straightforward WCF strategy that is based in research and which should prove effective at improving student language accuracy in your classroom.



## Special Thanks & Acknowledgements

This training guide was generously funded by an Educational Research Grant of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Queen's University. (Kingston, Ontario)

Developing the text for this guide would have been impossible without the detailed literature review produced by our research assistant, Kathy Jiang.

Graphic design and page layout by Brian Houtman, room31.com.

## reflection:

Before you continue, take a moment to reflect on your current practices for providing feedback on student writing assignments. What are the biggest challenges you face when you sit down to evaluate student writing? What questions do you have about providing feedback?

## scope.

Before beginning a discussion of WCF in earnest, it's worth briefly stopping to consider the kinds of errors that language learning students make in their writing assignments. This will allow us to see the kinds of errors that this guide is and is not equipped to address.

### // content feedback & form feedback

When responding to a piece of student writing, instructors often comment on literal content. For example, they may suggest additional examples to help a student strengthen an argument or note questions they have in the text margins. Though feedback on content plays an important role in student learning, advice for providing this kind of feedback is largely not within the scope of this guide. In part, this is because an instructor's attentiveness to content is not, strictly speaking, a concern of language instructors alone. Strategies for responding to content are largely considered a separate teaching skill for this guide.

Errors of form, on the other hand, are errors related to target language use, such as grammar, vocabulary, and the mechanics of punctuation and spelling. If all instructors who assign written work must confront form errors to some degree, most language instructors would agree that it is their responsibility to help correct these errors of form, just as most language learners expect to receive feedback on these kinds of errors from their language instructors (Chen et al., 2016; Ferris, 2004; Leki, 1991).

As a result, most of the recommendations in this guide aim to help language instructors, or instructors with language-based course objectives, determine how best to address student language errors. As we'll see, however, feedback on content can't be totally divorced from feedback on form.

## definitions & types of WCF.

Written corrective feedback (WCF) can be categorized according to several criteria. In this section, we'll discuss the most common qualifiers that researchers use to categorize instructor responses to student language errors.

### / focused vs. unfocused feedback

This first qualifier describes which language errors will receive the attention of the instructor.

When instructors give **unfocused feedback**, they try to provide comprehensive feedback on every or nearly every language error they come across in a student's piece of writing. An instructor may decide to provide feedback on only a smaller subset of the student's writing—a single page, say—however, if they provide comprehensive feedback on all or nearly all errors in this smaller sample, it is still **unfocused feedback**.

In contrast, when providing **focused feedback**, an instructor limits feedback to a relatively small number of pre-determined error types. For example, an instructor may decide to focus on three error categories: errors related to verb conjugation, the agreement of adjectives, and spelling. Importantly, when providing **focused feedback**, the instructor must not comment on errors outside of the select group of pre-determined error types. To be considered **focused feedback**, the number of pre-determined error categories must be relatively small (think single digit).

## / direct vs. indirect feedback

This second qualifier describes how the instructor responds to errors that they've decided to address.

**Direct feedback** is an explicit correction of a student's errors on their writing sample. **Direct feedback** should clearly indicate the location of the error and provide the correct form to the student. An instructor may, in addition, provide a metalinguistic or grammatical explanation of the kind of error that the student made—"spelling", "past participle", etc.—but to constitute **direct feedback** the instructor must clearly correct the error for the student.

Conversely, when using **indirect feedback**, an instructor indicates the location of a student error but does not provide the student with the correct form. A range of instructional strategies constitutes **indirect feedback**. For example, an instructor may simply underline the location of an error, or they might write in a clue above certain errors ("preposition"), or they may use a detailed error code to help students understand the types of errors they made and where these errors are found.

### reflection:

Think back to the way you teach: how do you generally give feedback on student writing? Do you tend to provide more focused feedback, of say, 5-8 error types, or more unfocused feedback? Do you correct errors for the students or simply indicate where their errors are?

Are students expected to correct their own errors without any additional help or do you provide clues? Which kind of feedback do you think students prefer?



## principles of effectiveness.

In the previous section, we examined the key terms that researchers use to describe different kinds of WCF. With these definitions in mind, the purpose of this section is to discuss the conditions under which these different kinds of WCF are most effective according to the research. As we'll see, the five principles of effectiveness that we've chosen to highlight work in concert to create a coherent framework for providing WCF that is effective for students, efficient for instructors, and responsive to the needs of learners in various instructional settings.

### // principle 1: less really is more ! focus on focused feedback !

While the research into WCF in the second language context is relatively new, one of its key findings has been settled across numerous studies. **Focused feedback**, that is, feedback that targets a limited number of specific, pre-determined error types, has generally proven to be more effective than **unfocused feedback**, or feedback that targets all of a learner's errors (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Ellis, 2009; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Farrokhi & Sattarpour, 2012; Kang & Han, 2015; Kurzer, 2018; Sheen, 2007). Researchers further theorize that **focused feedback** may be more effective than **unfocused feedback** at helping learners to make significant long-term gains from instructor corrections. (Ellis et al., 2008).

Researchers have developed several hypotheses to explain why **unfocused feedback** proves to be less effective. Firstly, **unfocused feedback** is believed to have a negative impact on a student's motivation and overall confidence in their writing (Lee, 2019). Secondly, **unfocused feedback** simply provides learners with too much feedback, leaving them unable to parse and process critical information about their language use from the feedback they receive (Saavedra & Campos, 2018; Sheen, 2007).

We lead with this finding not only because it grounds our approach to WCF, but because it runs contrary to the beliefs of many instructors (Köksal et al., 2018). Instructors rightly expect that the hours they spend diligently identifying each error in their students' writing assignments will lead to a proportional improvement in the language use of their students. Unfortunately, instructor faith in **unfocused feedback** has not been validated by researchers: **unfocused feedback** really does appear to be less effective at reducing future errors than **focused feedback**.

The good thing, however, is that with this first principle we have the privilege of being able to tell instructors that less really is more. Restricting error correction to errors in a small number of error categories really will improve your students' writing more than any comprehensive, often brutally time-consuming approach.



What do we mean by a small number of error categories? While it is true that studies in the literature often examine the effects of **focused feedback** on only 1 or 2 error categories, we find that most instructors would consider this kind of extremely **focused feedback** unrealistic and even unfeasible for their classrooms. Instead, and keeping in line with the recommendations of Lee (2019), we suggest instructors focus their corrections on **three to six error categories per assignment**. Try to limit the number of error categories to the lowest number of categories that are truly essential for the learning objectives of each assignment.

## // principle 2: prioritize indirect feedback for all learners except beginners.

Principle 1 has helped us to understand the importance of limiting the scope of our error correction, but it did not tell us how to correct errors within this more focused approach. This second principle will tell us how to annotate these errors when we encounter them.

### / learner proficiency and WCF selection

Of all the potential variables that impact WCF effectiveness, research has found that a learner's proficiency is the strongest factor in determining the effectiveness of specific kinds of WCF (Kang & Han, 2015). Keeping this important finding in mind, we recommend the following general principle for annotating student errors in pre-determined error categories:

Instructors should prioritize **indirect feedback**, or feedback that signals the location and sometimes type of error, for all learners at intermediate (B1) proficiency and above.

Research has shown that **indirect feedback** has proven to be more effective at reducing future errors in the long-term. Importantly however, this benefit only holds for learners who have a sufficient understanding of the language to correct the errors an instructor has located for them, which is why we do not recommend **indirect feedback** for students with a lower than intermediate (B1) proficiency (Ellis, 2009; Ferris, 2004; Kang & Han, 2015). Once learners are able to self-correct, however, researchers believe that **indirect feedback** leads to more sustained improvements in writing because this type of feedback invites students to participate in their learning and discover the nature of their errors (Kurzer, 2019). As students advance in proficiency from B1 to higher levels, instructors should feel free to withhold an increasing amount of information from students about their errors. With advanced (C1) learners, for example, an instructor can simply underline the location of a student's errors without identifying the type of error for the student.

On the other hand, at novice proficiency levels (A1 and A2), learners simply cannot marshal the resources necessary to correct themselves. With these learners, instructors should instead use **direct feedback**, or feedback that corrects mistakes on behalf of learners, as students continue to develop the capacity to correct their own errors. Researchers believe that the explicit instructor corrections of **direct feedback** help beginners expand their understanding of the language in important ways (Kang & Han, 2015). Furthermore, Sheen (2007) has found that **direct feedback** can be made even more effective if it is combined with **metalinguistic explanations** that not only correct mistakes but communicate in clear language why learners made a mistake in the first place. As a result, consider combining **direct feedback** with level-appropriate explanations of errors for your beginner learners.

We can now summarize the findings of principles 1 and 2 for selecting WCF types:

	focused or unfocused?	direct or indirect?	sample WCF
novice proficiency	FOCUSED	DIRECT	explicit correction of student errors that fall within 3-6 predetermined error categories, combined with explanations of these errors
intermediate proficiency	FOCUSED	INCREASINGLY INDIRECT	using a correction code to locate and code errors that fall within 3-6 predetermined error categories
advanced proficiency	FOCUSED	INDIRECT	simply underlining errors that fall within 3-6 predetermined error categories

### // principle 3: combine focused WCF with feedback on content!

Although we mentioned at the outset of this guide that suggestions on how to provide feedback on student content were not within the scope of this guide, a word on content is in order. One of the advantages of the **focused WCF** framework that we're proposing is that it reduces the amount of time instructors spend on locating and correcting language errors, and gives them more time to comment on other textual features, like structure or content.

As it turns out, research is beginning to show that instructor feedback on content is important and has profound effects on language accuracy gains. As Biber et al. (2011) state in clear language: "Even when the writing development goals are to improve grammatical accuracy, **feedback on form coupled with feedback on content is more effective than feedback focused exclusively on form**" (p. 54). In other words, regardless of their assessment goals, instructors simply cannot afford to ignore the content of student's writing assignments: **WCF should always be combined with instructor comments on student content.**

### // principle 4: tell learners what to expect from your feedback!

Since this guide advocates for the use of **focused feedback** at all levels of learner proficiency, it is important that instructors tell their students how they intend to implement WCF and why they intend to do so in this way. How, and to whom, this message is communicated will vary based on instructional setting, but it should be done. Otherwise, students may not fully understand why their instructor returned work without fully correcting all their errors. Students may misinterpret **focused feedback** as instructor carelessness, laziness, or even incompetence. Indeed, in a survey on WCF, 23% of surveyed instructors had questions about how students, parents, fellow teachers, and administrators would perceive them as a result of their correction style (Lee, 2019). To counter these misinterpretations, **we recommend taking instructional time to explain WCF choices to learners in a level-appropriate way before the first written assignment.** This will ensure that students understand the chosen approach to WCF and what they should expect from instructor feedback going forward (Atmaca, 2016; Ferris, 2004).

We further recommend that instructors incorporate the specific error categories that are going to be targeted for error correction into their assignment descriptions so that students have a clear understanding of how learning objectives, error categories, and evaluation criteria all relate to one another as they prepare their written work.

### // principle 5: teach learners what to do with feedback!

In order to improve the effectiveness of WCF, researchers recommend teaching learners how to respond to the feedback that they receive (Dowden et al., 2013).

### / indirect feedback methods

Explicit instruction in how to use feedback is especially important when using **indirect feedback** methods because instructors identify, but do not correct, student errors in this approach. What might this kind of instruction look like? Well, if an instructor is coding student errors with a correction code, they should at minimum, provide students with a copy of this code. Because these codes often use precise linguistic terms such as “preposition,” “particle,” or “past participle,” the code should also provide easy-to-understand examples of what instructors mean by errors of each type. Beyond this, instructors should provide explicit in-class instruction and practice in using the code to correct sample or common errors.

Finally, with indirect feedback methods, students should be asked to correct their own errors and resubmit work. Instructional settings will differ as to the number of revisions that are feasible, but, to the extent possible, **instructors should require learners to revise and resubmit work at least once**, even if this means decreasing the overall number of written assignments. This final step is important because research has shown that students make more permanent gains from WCF when they are asked to revise and self-correct their written work (Atmaca, 2016; Ellis, 2009; Ferris, 2004).

### / direct feedback methods

Teaching learners how to interpret their feedback is also important for **direct feedback** methods. Even when instructors correct targeted errors on behalf of learners, students still need to be taught what to do with this feedback. If possible, instructors should create activities that push students towards understanding the kinds of errors they make. Brown (1994) argues, for example, that learners who can't be expected to self-correct can still benefit from submitting a student-revised copy of teacher-corrected work (Kang & Han, 2015). Additionally, Ferris (2004) has suggested that students benefit from keeping a personal log of the frequency of their errors, maintaining that these logs help students to identify their weaknesses and notice the improvements in their writing skills.

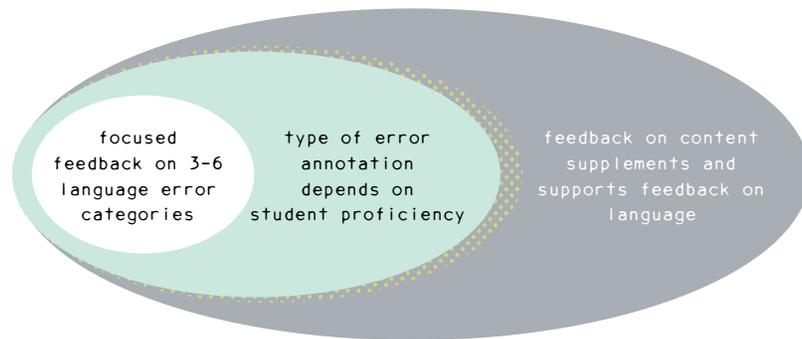
WCF communicates critical information about language acquisition progress to students, but if instructors want their feedback to be truly effective, they must teach students how to interpret the information encoded in feedback, and design post-WCF tasks that force students to interpret that feedback. Revising writing assignments on the basis of instructor WCF, and keeping error logs are just a few examples of relatively easy to implement tasks that allow students to learn from instructor WCF. Ultimately what matters is that instructors give students a meaningful task that they can only complete by engaging with the feedback they received.

In the next and final section, we'll suggest additional activities that instructors can use to complement their WCF and further increase its effectiveness.

### summary of WCF principles

1. **Less Really is More! Focus on Focused Feedback!**
2. **Prioritize Indirect Feedback for all Learners Except Beginners!**
3. **Combine Focused WCF with Feedback on Content!**
4. **Tell Learners What to Expect from Feedback!**
5. **Teach Learners What to Do With Feedback!**

Taken together, the five principles of effectiveness form a single, coherent approach to instructor WCF:



### reflection:

What surprised you most in these principles of effectiveness? Do any of these principles change the way you think about providing WCF? Had you realized feedback on content was so important? Finally, take a moment to think about your instructional setting and courses. What challenges do you anticipate in implementing WCF according to this framework? How might you begin to solve them?

## final considerations.

In the previous sections of this guide we took a look at different ways researchers describe and categorize feedback that instructors provide on student writing, and discussed principles for maximizing student gains from instructor feedback. Ultimately, we recommended an approach based on **focused WCF** that is **tailored to the language proficiency of students** and combined with **feedback on student content**. In this section, we provide instructors with a final set of considerations for adapting these research findings to their instructional settings.

### // consider other ways of targeting student errors outside of your error categories

Although research suggests focusing WCF on a limited number of error categories, severe errors outside of these categories can and should still be addressed; however, they should not be addressed via instructor corrections on an individual student's piece of writing. That is, **instructor WCF should be used in combination with a variety of other methods to improve language accuracy**. Here are a few other options you may want to consider for correcting non-target errors.

#### / post-writing grammar activities

Lee (2019) recommends that instructors make note of severe non-target language errors across multiple students' assignments and use this information to design post-writing grammar activities. Although students will not receive individualized WCF on these errors, all students will participate in these post-writing grammar activities and learn how to avoid these kinds of errors in the future.

#### / peer feedback

Although students may be initially reluctant to provide WCF to their peers, or even accept the legitimacy of peer WCF, research has shown support for the effectiveness of WCF provided by other students. In fact, in some cases, students made more significant language gains from peer WCF than instructor WCF (Biber et al., 2011). As Lee (2019) points out, incorporating peer WCF throughout the writing process is an important way of inviting students to take additional responsibility for their own learning. For example, Lee (2019) further suggests that students might determine 1-3 error types that they personally struggle with and have peers provide them focused WCF on these categories as they work on drafts of their work. In this way, peer WCF becomes a way to ensure that students receive additional support that is targeted to their needs, without the need to have instructors determine these personalized categories for each student.

## // consider the genre of text

One of the most important variables for determining the impact of WCF is, perhaps surprisingly, **the genre of text** that students are asked to write. In a meta-study comparing the effectiveness of instructor WCF on compositions, letters, and personal journals, students made the most language gains from WCF on compositions and the least on personal journals. Kang and Han (2015) theorize that this may be because journals are typically introspective, reflective texts that aren't meant to be read, let alone corrected, by anyone else.

While this does suggest that certain kinds of texts are less suited for instructor WCF, it doesn't mean that instructors shouldn't assign them, only that instructor time should not be spent on WCF. **Instructors should respond to reflective genres such as personal journals by addressing student content not language use.** With these kinds of genres, common student language errors can be addressed with post-writing grammar activities targeted at the whole class.

## // consider students' feelings in summary and content feedback

Finally, remember that, like everyone else, students' ability to understand and respond to feedback will be impacted by their emotional response to that feedback (Dowden et al., 2013). In fact, one of the primary reasons that researchers discourage the overuse of **unfocused WCF**—aside from the fact that it does little to improve student writing—is precisely because **unfocused WCF** harms student motivation and confidence (Lee, 2019).

Given this link between cognition and emotion, instructors should carefully consider how they approach their summary or content feedback to student writing. Constructive criticism should be framed in such a way as to ensure that students will not perceive (or intuit) it as a threat to their sense of self. Feedback that students consider destructive rather than constructive does more harm than good (Dowden et al., 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This is all the more challenging since research has shown that there are significant discrepancies between an instructor's intent when leaving feedback and students' emotional response to that same feedback (Dowden et al., 2013).

## // in leaving constructive feedback:

- Keep the tone positive and focused on future growth.
- Avoid a laundry list of every correctable error.
- Using your learning outcomes as a guide, identify 1-2 significant elements that a student can realistically improve on before the next assignment.
- To the extent possible, detail concrete steps that students can take to improve on these elements in preparing their next draft or assignment.
- Balance this constructive feedback with positive feedback focused on specific examples of successful elements in a student's piece of writing.

In other words: keep it positive, meaningful, and specific enough to be actionable. This kind of feedback will take time to prepare. However, by focusing their WCF, instructors gain back time to provide **focused feedback on content and structure** as well.

## // consider the timing of your WCF

For certain assignments consider withholding WCF and providing only content feedback on students' first drafts. Delaying WCF will free you to suggest truly substantial changes in content and structure that will help students better communicate their ideas in future drafts. Once students use this composition feedback to revise their work, you can then provide WCF on a second draft according to the framework we've provided in this guide.

We understand that this will not be possible for all assignments, but on those assignments where it is possible, we believe delayed WCF has several advantages for increasing the effectiveness of your WCF strategy. For one, because you will primarily respond to student content in the first draft, the role of content feedback on the second draft will be minimal: it will primarily help students to see if the changes they made between drafts had the desired outcomes. Importantly, because feedback on content and structure is lessened for the second draft, you significantly increase the cognitive resources available for students trying to process your WCF (Sheen, 2007). Although our approach always requires combining some content feedback with WCF (even for this second draft), in splitting the emphasis of feedback across your drafts, your language feedback will become more salient and, as a result, more effective for learners.

## // consider the boundaries of research findings

With the exception of Truscott (1996), who famously argued that grammar correction actively harmed students' language development, the vast majority of researchers have found that WCF is more effective for helping learners reduce future errors than not giving students any WCF. Studies begin to differ from one another as they begin to explore the kinds of WCF that might be most effective and the types of instructional settings in which this WCF may be most helpful. In other words, the exact information that we would have loved to have when writing this guide and making recommendations to other instructors. Unfortunately, the research didn't often offer such clear-cut findings. As one example, studies differed in how they defined the effectiveness of feedback. For some studies, effective feedback meant that students were able to correctly revise their own written work. For others, it meant that students had to avoid repeating past errors in future writing assignments. In yet other studies, effective feedback meant that students did not repeat past errors in a separate grammar test given to them long after they received WCF. In fact, in 2004, Dana R. Ferris, a critical researcher in the field of WCF, lamented that "despite [...] several decades of research activity in this area, we are virtually at Square One, as the existing research base is incomplete and inconsistent, and it would certainly be premature to formulate any conclusions about this topic" (p. 49).

Importantly for us, Ferris didn't stop once she had critiqued her field. She went on to analyze the existing literature—flaws and all—and found that the research strongly predicated, but could not yet prove, the effectiveness of certain types of WCF. In the nearly twenty years since Ferris wrote her article, there does appear to be a growing, if preliminary, consensus about the effectiveness of certain kinds of WCF under certain conditions. As we combed through the literature to write this guide, we've tried to align our principles of effectiveness with the major trends we found in the research and build a framework that is responsive to the demands of real classrooms. Instructors reading this guide should feel very confident that our recommendations align with the current state of research in this evolving field. As Ferris (2004) herself noted as she ended her study, while instructors await definitive confirmation from research into WCF, "we must, in the meantime, rely on the research evidence that does exist, our own experience and intuitions, and the desires of our students to inform and guide us" (pp. 58-59). As you reflect on how the recommendations of this guide might help you to rethink your approach to WCF, we hope you'll remain as flexible and open as possible while trusting your own past experience of what works in your classroom.

## conclusion.

As instructors, we know that writing assignments are a powerful tool for developing skills and assessing a wide range of learning objectives in the language classroom. However, we also know that it can be challenging (and even tedious) to evaluate student writing. In an effort to address errors of language, structure, and content, instructors often stretch themselves thin, commenting on everything their attention and focus will allow. As we hope to have shown in this guide, it doesn't have to be this way.

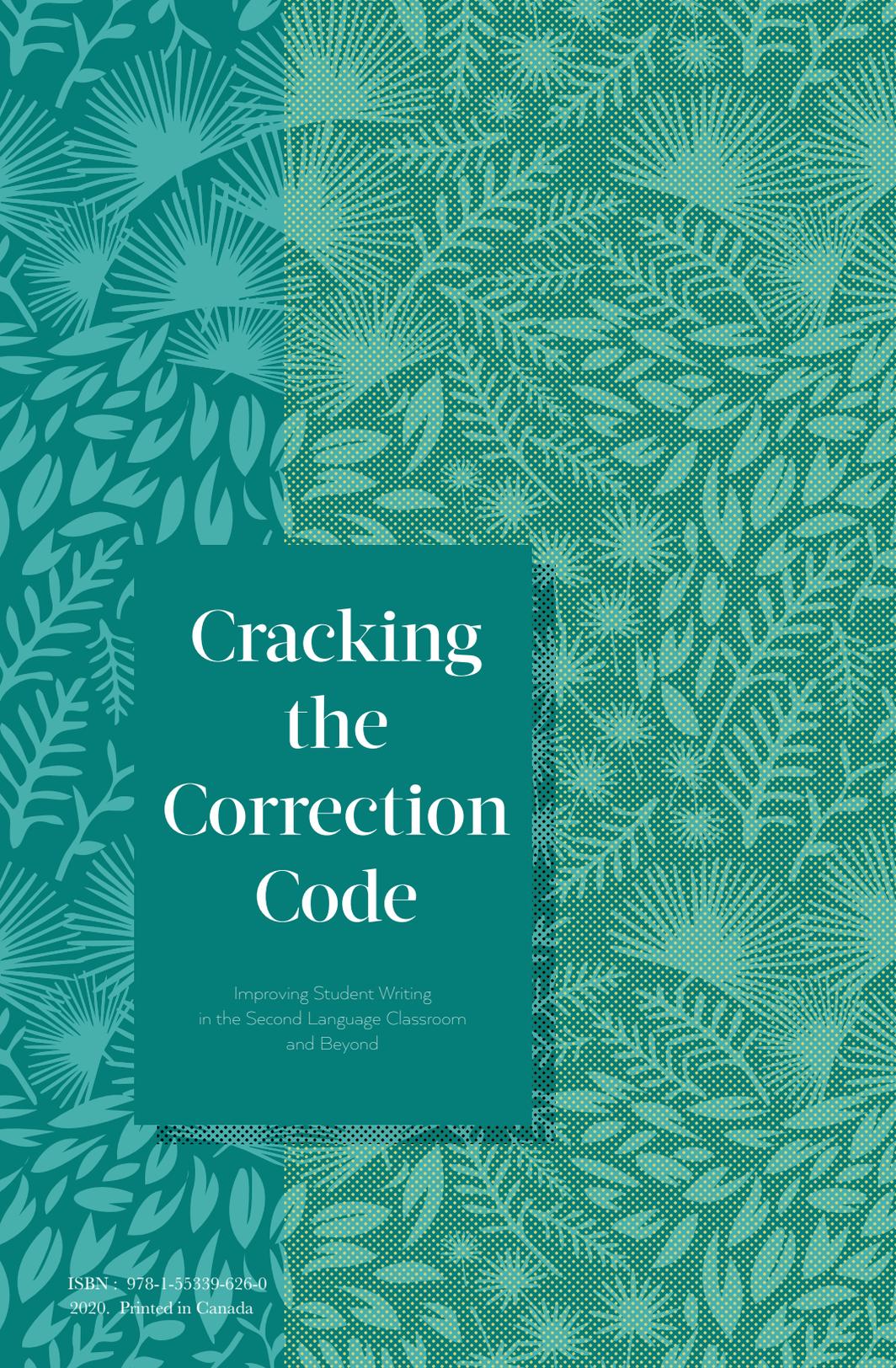
The purpose of this guide has been to provide instructors with an evidence-based framework for responding to language errors in student writing in a way that is effective yet also respectful of limited instructor time. To do so, we've tried to bridge the divide between teacher practice and educational research by introducing terms that researchers use to describe common WCF methods, and summarizing key research findings on the effectiveness of these methods. In the end, we hope that this guide empowers instructors by giving them a clear sense of what methods of WCF are likely to work in their teaching context, and how to adjust them to ensure students get the most out of their corrections.

That said, we know it isn't always easy to adopt new and somewhat unfamiliar approaches into our teaching practices. To that end, we've created a companion workbook, *Cracking the Correction Code: A Companion Workbook for Providing Written Corrective Feedback on Assignments from Beginning to End*, with activities designed to break down and make concrete the process of providing WCF on a specific assignment. We hope that this workbook simplifies the process of incorporating our WCF framework into your classroom as simple and sustainable as possible.

In closing, this guide is only meant to be an introduction to principles of WCF that we thought would be immediately useful for instructors. But if, after reading this guide, you find yourself curious about the research into certain aspects of WCF, we invite you to take a look at the further reading section at the very end of this guide. The research has totally changed the way we think about grading written work, and we believe it will do the same for you.

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ISBN : 978-1-55339-626-0  
2020. Printed in Canada