INVESTIGATING TEACHERS' WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN A SAUDI EFL CONTEXT: HOW DO THEY ALIGN WITH THEIR BELIEFS, INSTITUTIONAL GUIDELINES, AND STUDENTS' PREFERENCES?

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In recent years there have been a growing number of studies on written corrective feedback (WCF), particularly in terms of the efficacy of different types of WCF. However, few of these studies have investigated what shapes teachers' WCF practices and how they align with students' preferences. This study, conducted with staff and students in a large Saudi university that has strict guidelines on WCF provision, examined the teachers' WCF practices in relation to the institutional guidelines, their own beliefs about the most effective forms of WCF as well as their students' preferences. Data collected included the feedback given by three teachers on their students' writing (15 students per teacher), follow-up interviews with the teachers, and questionnaires completed by the students. The study found that although the teachers followed the strict guidelines and provided comprehensive indirect feedback, these practices did not always accord with their beliefs. Most of the WCF given tended to be on mechanics, and the teachers seemed unaware that this was the main focus of their feedback. They were also largely unaware that their students preferred direct feedback and mainly on grammar. We conclude our paper with some policy recommendations.

KEY WORDS: written corrective feedback, teachers' beliefs, students' preferences, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Writing in a second language (L2) is challenging, and finding ways to assist learners to develop their L2 writing has been a major objective for teachers and educational researchers (Polio, 2003). One way commonly employed to help students improve their writing is the provision of feedback. Feedback is seen as essential to improve L2 writing (Leki, 2007). Teacher feedback can cover all aspects of writing, including content, organization and language use. Written feedback comments which specifically focus on language use (grammar, vocabulary, mechanics) are referred to as written corrective feedback (WCF), and are commonly used by ESL and EFL teachers (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Following recent debates in the literature about the efficacy of WCF (e.g., Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996), there has been a growing body of empirical research investigating WCF. These

studies can be divided into two main strands of research. One strand has focused on the effect of different types of WCF on L2 writing accuracy. For example, some researchers (e.g., Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009) compared the effect of targeted versus comprehensive WCF. In targeted WCF, the feedback is provided only on a few error types (e.g., use of articles); comprehensive WCF is an attempt to provide feedback on all errors. Studies suggest that targeted WCF may be more beneficial than comprehensive feedback and may be indeed more manageable for teachers and students. Other researchers (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2010; van Beuningen, de Jong, & Kuiken, 2012) have investigated and compared the effect of direct versus indirect feedback. Direct feedback, also called overt WCF, involves identifying the error and providing the correct form (Ferris, 2003). Indirect WCF involves identifying the error by, for example, using an error code (e.g., 'art' to signal an error in the use of articles), underlining or circling the error but without providing the correct form. There are inconclusive findings about whether direct feedback is more effective than indirect feedback. A number of factors may explain these inconclusive findings, including the error type (Ferris, 2006), learners' L2 aptitude (Sheen, 2007), the L2 proficiency of the learners (e.g., Sheen et al., 2009), as well as a host of affective factors such as learners' beliefs and prior educational experiences (e.g., Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010a, b). This strand of research has been experimental, conducted outside regular language classrooms.

Another strand of research has focused on students' perceptions about WCF (e.g., Lee, 2004, 2008; Leki, 1991, 2006). These studies, usually based on surveys, show that students want and expect their writing teachers to provide comprehensive WCF on their writing. These studies have been conducted in a range of educational contexts and with adult and adolescent learners, such as adult learners in Saudi Arabia (Grami, 2005), adult learners in the US (Leki, 1991, 2006), and secondary school learners in Hong Kong (Lee, 2008). However, there are some mixed findings about students' preferences for the type of WCF. For example, Leki's (1991) survey of 100 ESL university students reported that students preferred indirect (coded) WCF. Other studies, conducted with EFL learners (e.g., Diab, 2005; Halimi, 2008) found that students preferred to receive direct WCF.

Another related issue investigated is whether students' preferences align with teachers' preferences. For example, Hamouda's (2011) large scale survey (200 EFL students and 20 teachers) conducted in Saudi Arabia found that both students and their teachers valued written feedback. However, the teachers preferred to give selective indirect feedback; the students preferred to receive comprehensive direct feedback. Lee's (2004) study, with secondary school students in Hong Kong, also found that most students wanted comprehensive and direct WCF. The teachers did provide comprehensive feedback, but a sizeable proportion (35%) of that feedback was indirect. The students commented that they had difficulty in comprehending some of the error codes in the indirect feedback. Lee also

reported that a sizeable proportion (almost 50%) of the students in her study felt it was their teachers' responsibility to provide direct WCF.

Divergences between teachers' practices and students' expectations may impact on whether and how students respond to the feedback provided. Leading researchers on WCF such as Ferris (2006) and Lee (2004) suggest that teachers should take into account the desires of their students when considering the type of WCF they provide on their students' writing. These researchers, among others (e.g., Ellis, 2010; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011), have noted the lack of research on teachers' WCF practices and beliefs.

One interesting area of investigation is what guides teachers in providing WCF, and specifically whether teachers follow institutional guidelines or their own beliefs. For example, a study by Ferris (2006), conducted in a US university, found that although the university had published guidelines suggesting the provision of indirect feedback (based on a chart of codes), the majority of the teachers (60%) used direct corrections. In the interviews, the teachers claimed that the type of WCF they provided was guided by their intuitions about treatable/untreatable errors, but their practices were not always found to be consistent with their beliefs. Similarly, Montgomery and Baker (2007) found that the feedback practices of their ESL teachers were very different to how they were instructed to provide feedback. The teachers provided feedback mainly on language use on both initial and subsequent drafts and yet they were instructed to focus in early drafts on global issues (content, organisation) and on language only in later drafts. Furthermore, the teachers' survey responses indicated that they were unaware of their feedback practices. This lack of correspondence between perceptions and practices was confirmed by Lee's (2009) survey with EFL teachers in Hong Kong. Lee identified ten mismatches between the teachers reported beliefs and their WCF practices.

In a study conducted with secondary school teachers in Hong Kong, Lee (2008) found that teachers' feedback contradicted the principles recommended in the curriculum documents. Whereas the curriculum documents recommend selective WCF, teachers tended to provide comprehensive WCF feedback. This was despite the fact that some teachers admitted that selective feedback would be better for their students. Lee (2008) identified four factors that influenced the teachers' feedback practices. These factors included their beliefs about the importance of grammatical accuracy, a sense of accountability and desire to satisfy the expectations of students and their parents particularly in an educational system driven by exams, their desire to appear hard-working because of the institutional appraisal system, and lack of training. The study highlights the complexity of contextual and individual factors and the tensions that may exist between them.

Thus the available studies suggest that teachers' practices may not follow institutional guidelines, particularly when these guidelines do not accord with their beliefs. However, it should be noted that these studies have been conducted in contexts where the institutional

guidelines concerning WCF may not be strictly enforced. Our study sought to investigate teachers' practices in a university where there are strictly policed institutional guidelines on WCF, and compare these practices not only to teachers' beliefs but also to their students' preferences. Our study was conducted in Saudi Arabia, a rapidly growing and evolving EFL context, and one that has thus far received little research attention. In this sense, our study aimed to address gaps in the literature and provide researchers with insights into WCF in different L2 learning contexts. However, we also saw our study as action research - providing the teacher informants with the opportunity to reflect on their feedback practices and perhaps ultimately leading to the formulation of more informed policies on WCF in their institution.

We set out to investigate the teachers' feedback practices in terms of the extent of the feedback, type and focus of the feedback and how these practices align with the guidelines, the teachers' expressed beliefs as well as their students' preferences. Thus the research questions guiding our study were as follows:

1.   What is the nature of teachers' WCF given on their students' writing?

2.   To what extent do teachers' WCF practices accord with institutional guidelines and with their beliefs about WCF?

3.   What are the preferences of Saudi EFL students with regard to WCF?

4.   Do Saudi EFL students' preferences accord with teachers' practices?

THE STUDY

The study took place in a large and well-established university in Saudi Arabia. The university offers a one-year intensive preparatory program which aims to bridge the gap between secondary school education and university study. The English language course is part of the preparatory year. It is designed to assist students achieve an intermediate level of proficiency in English which is the level required for acceptance into the university. Students' assessment is based on mid-module and final examinations (70%) and continuous assessment (30%). In the EFL writing classes, the focus is on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary (exercises assigned from the set text-books) and on the production of a well-structured essay, using model texts. Students write short essays (150 words) on topics based on the units of study. They receive feedback on their draft, mainly on the use of language, and are then asked to submit a revised draft which is graded. Class sizes range from 26 to 30 students.

Unlike other universities in Saudi Arabia, which provide no guidelines on WCF, this university has strict guidelines on WCF. The university's policy is that WCF should be comprehensive and indirect. Teachers are expected to provide feedback on all errors. Furthermore they are required to use error codes from a prescribed list (see Appendix 1). The list, containing abbreviations and symbols and a gloss of what these mean, was adapted from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) code list. It is given to students at the beginning of

the semester and the codes explained. The policy is monitored closely. The writing teachers are supervised by a coordinator who regularly checks students' essays and teacher feedback.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were three EFL teachers and their students. An invitation to the teachers elicited seven volunteers. Since this was an exploratory study, we selected three teachers who could represent the English staff at the university in terms of their L1 (native vs. non-native speakers of English), educational qualifications (TESOL trained or not), and years of teaching experience (one or several years of teaching experience). Our selection was also guided by the coordinator's recommendations. We chose teachers who were considered to be among the best writing teachers. Table 1 summarises details about the teachers' background. All names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Teachers' background information

Teacher	Years of experience	Country of origin	Educational qualifications
Andrew	2 years	England	Masters in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
Badir	9 years	Egypt	Masters in TESOL
Charles	1 year	England	Bachelor in Finance + a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA)

A total of 45 Saudi male EFL students (15 per teacher) agreed to participate in the study. The students' age ranged from 18 to 21. They were native speakers of Arabic and had been studying English for an average of seven years.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The data used in this study came from three sources: students' first draft essays (about 150 words long) with teacher feedback comments, questionnaires completed by the students, and interviews conducted with the three teachers. The questionnaire and the interview questions were adopted from Lee (2004). The main purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit the students' attitudes and preferences with respect to the extent, focus, and type of their teachers' WCF (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to improve ease of response.

The interviews conducted with the teachers were semi-structured. They included general questions about WCF as well as questions that were based on the analysis of the teachers' WCF given on the students' essays (see Appendix 3). The aim of the interviews was to investigate the teachers' beliefs about WCF as well as the reasons for their WCF practice.

The interviews were conducted via Skype and were recorded using "Pamela" Software. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English with Andrew and Charles and in Arabic with Badir.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected included 45 students' written first draft essays with their teachers' feedback comments, three transcribed teacher interviews (including one translated from Arabic), and 41 completed questionnaires as some students were absent during the session when questionnaires were completed.

STUDENT TEXTS

A coding scheme was developed to code the feedback given to students on their first drafts. Feedback was coded for feedback points. A feedback point refers to any written intervention made by the teacher (Hyland, 2003) and thus included the following: comments, underlining, error codes or reformulations. For the purpose of this study, only the feedback points on language use and which were given within the students' texts or in the margins were identified. Comments on other aspects of writing, such as text structure (e.g., 'not a good conclusion') and end comments were omitted from analysis. The end comments tended to summarise the gist of the feedback given.

The feedback points were categorised for focus, following the scheme used by Storch and Tapper (2000). Three categories were used for what the feedback dealt with:

i. Grammar: feedback on morphological and syntactic errors such as errors in verb tense or unnecessary words;

ii. Language expression: feedback on lexical errors such as wrong words or unclear meanings;

iii. Mechanics: feedback on errors in spelling, punctuation and capitalisation.

Each Feedback point was further coded for whether it was direct or indirect. Direct feedback included the provision of correct forms (written above the error) or a reformulation; indirect feedback included instances where the error was indicated by underlining, circling or a symbol (e.g., ∧ to signal a missing word or words). The following examples illustrate how feedback was coded in this study.

Examples of coding feedback points

VT

1. He travel yesterday   Indirect, grammar (code indicating a verb tense error)

2. I went to city ~~middle~~ centre   Direct, language expression

Five randomly selected scripts were coded by a second researcher to check for inter-rater reliability. A high level of agreement was found between the raters for identifying WCF points (82%), the focus of WCF (86%), and the type of WCF (100%).

QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW DATA

The questionnaires were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The students' responses to closed questions were counted manually. Given the relatively small data set, only descriptive statistics were used. The students' responses to the open ended questions were analysed qualitatively, searching for common themes. These were then grouped. Similarly, a thematic analysis was used to code interview data whereby the responses to the questions were analysed and a summary along with representative quotes produced (Merriam, 2002).

RESULTS

We report first on the amount and type of feedback provided by each of the three teachers on 15 essay drafts (a total of 45 essay drafts), followed by their expressed beliefs and then the students' preferences.

WCF ON STUDENTS' FIRST DRAFTS

Table 2 shows the raw frequency, average and range of feedback points, as well as the type of WCF and the percentage it represents of the feedback provided by the teacher on their students' first drafts.

Table 2. Amount and type of WCF given by the three teachers

Teachers	WCF points			Type of WCF & % of total	
	Total	Average	Range	Direct	Indirect
Andrew	301	20.1	18 - 24	50 (16.6%)	251 (83.4%)
Badir	268	17.8	14 - 21	91 (33.9%)	177 (66.1%)
Charles	219	14.6	10 - 18	98 (44.7%)	121 (55.3%)
Total	788	17.5	10 - 24	234 (29.7%)	554 (70.3%)

As the table shows, the three teachers provided a large number of WCF points. The average number of WCF points that the teachers gave per essay (17.5) was high relative to the length of the essay (150 words). A quick reading of the essay drafts confirmed that teachers gave WCF

comprehensively, on almost all errors. We note, however, that there were instances where errors were overlooked, and that these errors seemed to be mainly in lexis and sentence structure. The following are examples of sentences containing errors that were not corrected:

> Finally, you will need someone to look after you, because you will become adult.

> Let me tell you about first advantage; when you getting older.

There were some differences between the three teachers, with Andrew and Badir giving more feedback than Charles. The feedback provided was predominantly indirect (70.3%), utilising the error codes provided by the English department. However, Charles provided a relatively large amount of direct WCF, more than the other two teachers. This direct feedback was often in the form of rewriting an entire sentence, and this may have reduced the count of WCF points that he gave.

Table 3 summarises the results for what the WCF provided focused on, whether grammar, lexis or mechanics. The table shows that all three teachers gave the most WCF on mechanics (52.5%) and the least on language expression (12.6%). This was particularly noticeable in the drafts graded by Andrew, where WCF on mechanics formed over 65% of all feedback points, and language expression the least (8.3%). Charles also gave more feedback on mechanics (43.8%) than on other aspects of writing, but the amount of feedback on grammar and expression was approximately the same (just under 30% on each area). Badir was the only teacher who provided almost the same amount of attention in his feedback to grammar (48.9%) and mechanics (45.2%). The most commonly identified errors in grammar were related to verb tense, articles and prepositions; in mechanics, spelling and punctuation; and in language expression, wrong word choice or unclear meaning.

Table 3. Focus of WCF

Teachers	Grammar	Language expression	Mechanics
Andrew	79 (26.2%)	25 (8.3%)	197 (65.5%)
Badir	131 (48.9%)	16 (5.9%)	121 (45.2%)
Charles	65 (29.7%)	58 (26.5%)	96 (43.8%)
Total	275 (34.9%)	99 (12.6%)	414 (52.5%)

Table 4 summarises the findings for focus and type of WCF. It shows what percentage of feedback given on the three focus areas was direct versus indirect feedback. As the table shows, indirect feedback was provided mainly on errors in mechanics (88.9%), followed by errors in language expression (62.6%). It is interesting to note that despite the large number of symbols and abbreviations on the error guide (Appendix 1) referring to various

grammatical errors, these errors received more direct (55.4%) than indirect feedback. All three teachers provided predominantly indirect WCF on errors in mechanics. However, there were again variations between the teachers. Andrew consistently provided more indirect than direct feedback on all error types. Badir and Charles provided more direct than indirect feedback on grammar.

Table 4. Focus and type of WCF

Teachers	Grammar		Language expression		Mechanics	
	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect
Andrew	24 (30.4%)	55 (69.6%)	3 (22%)	22 (88%)	23 (21.7%)	174 (78.3%)
Badir	78 (59.5%)	53 (40.5%)	3 (18.8%)	13 (81.2%)	12 (9.9%)	109 (90.1%)
Charles	51 (78.5%)	14 (21.5%)	31 (53.4%)	27 (46.6%)	11 (11.5%)	85 (88.5%)
Total	153 (55.6%)	122 (44.4%)	37 (37.4%)	62 (62.6%)	46 (11.1%)	368 (88.9%)

TEACHER INTERVIEWS

We next present our findings concerning the three teachers' beliefs about WCF. We considered in particular their views about the importance of WCF, what kind of feedback they thought they provided and why, and finally whether they were aware of their students' preferences for WCF.

Importance of giving WCF

The three teachers believed that accuracy in writing is very important. Andrew and Badir also felt that feedback is effective in improving accuracy. For example, Andrew said that 'giving feedback on students' writing errors will result in a significant improvement in their writing in the long term.' Badir thought that he could see evidence of the benefits of WCF, saying that 'I can now see the impact of the error correction on the improvement of my students' writing.' Only Charles expressed some hesitation about the impact of WCF on improving the students' accuracy, noting that students' ability to self-correct after being provided with WCF does not signify acquisition:

> just we highlight the mistakes for a student, does that mean he understands that point of grammar, does that mean he understands how to use that point of grammar? Maybe yes, maybe no. Are they learning something from their mistakes? I don't know. We are

sure that the student can write the text again correctly, but can he learn to write it independently later? It is not sure. You know, it's a bit of a grey area.

The extent of WCF (comprehensive vs. selective WCF)

The three teachers reported that they responded to their students' writing errors in a comprehensive way by correcting all errors that occurred. Andrew believed that the comprehensive approach was especially suitable given the proficiency of the students, as he said: 'At this low level, students need to be guided and directed when giving feedback and so all their errors need to be highlighted.' For Charles, it was the possible outcome of not correcting all errors that was of concern, and thus a sense that he would not be fulfilling his duties:

> If I just, say, corrected grammar and vocabulary but left mechanics, then this might mean for the student that it is OK for him to use a capital letter in the middle of a sentence. In this case I might not have done the full job.

In contrast, Badir believed that there is no point in correcting all errors. He stated:

> I personally prefer to correct some errors, the errors that are common and difficult among the students, and leave the rest of errors for students to identify and correct by themselves. This way can be more beneficial for students' learning and help them to be self-editors.

However, despite his preference for selective WCF correction, he corrected all errors because of the university policy and concerns for his tenure. He explained:

> But in reality I found myself must correct all errors and this is in order to follow the instructions by the university. If it was found that I didn't highlight all mistakes, then this would put me in a trouble with my coordinator. This may lead to affecting my annual appraisal.

Types of WCF (direct vs. indirect)

The teachers reported that they mainly used indirect WCF. However, they differed in their beliefs on which type is better. Andrew believed that the type of WCF given should be based on the students' proficiency level, a strategy he did not implement because of the university feedback policy, and again concerns regarding tenure. He explained the reason:

> I mostly used the error codes because this is what we were instructed to do. If a teacher was found not to be using error codes, then this might affect his job appraisal which might also affect his job contract. Personally if it was up to me, I am in the view that I think each case should be taken individually. When you have 20 to 30 students in class and maybe six to seven students whose level is very low, then they really need more

direct corrections because when they write their final draft, they would just write the same errors again because they didn't know what to do exactly with the codes I gave.

Badir believed that indirect feedback is most effective, noting that it is the kind of feedback strategy discussed in the literature and one that was used by his own teachers. However, he, like Andrew, also believed that the type of feedback should vary with the proficiency of the students, with indirect WCF being suitable for advanced students whereas direct WCF for low level students:

Giving indirect feedback with codes is a good strategy. It is the strategy that is used internationally and is found in well-known books. It was also used by my past teachers when I was a student, but I think it is more practical only for advanced students whereas direct feedback is needed for poor students.

Charles noted that the university guidelines recommending indirect WCF. However, he admitted that he was not sure which type of WCF is the most effective:

Giving codes over errors can be better as it is required by the university. But in fact I don't know whether it is effective for students' learning or not. I am not sure if it is the best type of feedback.

The focus of WCF (what the feedback should deal with)

The teachers had different beliefs with regard to the focus of their WCF and their beliefs did not align with their WCF practices. Andrew and Charles believed that WCF should focus specifically on vocabulary, and in fact thought that this is the area they provided most feedback. As Andrew said 'vocabulary is the most important aspect that should be focused on at this current level of the students so I gave errors related to vocabulary most of my feedback.' Charles also stated that feedback on vocabulary aligns with the focus of the class activities: 'vocabulary has received a great deal of attention in the activities of writing classes.' Yet, as shown in Table 3, most of their WCF dealt with mechanics.

Badir thought that he focused more on grammar and believed in its importance for students' writing relative to other aspects of writing, saying 'most of my feedback was given on grammatical mistakes whereas the rest of students' writing errors received fewer corrections.' He added, 'writing by using accurate grammar is very important for the students' current level. It plays an important role in conveying the right meaning of students' sentences.' Table 3 shows that he gave a similar number of feedback comments on grammar as he did on mechanics.

Awareness of students' preferences

The teachers admitted a lack of awareness of their students' preference with regard to the feedback on their writing. Andrew noted the futility of eliciting students' preferences: 'there

is no point in asking students about their preferences while I know that I won't be able to fulfill them if they are not in accord to what was required by the university.' In contrast, Charles expressed his intention to elicit his students' preferences in future. He said: 'Actually, the idea of asking my students about their preferences for feedback on errors did not come to my mind.' He added, 'Maybe I will give it a thought next time.'

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES

The students' questionnaires indicated that all the students valued receiving feedback from their teachers. The students provided several reasons for their wish to receive WCF, mainly related to the importance of WCF in identifying their errors and improving their writing in the future. As one student said, 'by receiving feedback I can be aware of my errors and correct them.' Another student said, 'indicating my writing errors by my teacher can help me to avoid them in subsequent writing.'

As for the extent of WCF, 94% of the students preferred to receive comprehensive WCF. One student explained that if he were not to receive feedback on all his errors, these errors would remain. Thus he wanted comprehensive feedback 'in order not to fossilize wrong information in my mind.'

The students' preferences for type of WCF (direct vs. indirect)

We asked students to report what kind of feedback they received and what kind they preferred. Although most students (75.7%) were aware that they received indirect WCF, the majority (68%) said that they prefer to receive direct WCF. The students provided different reasons for their preference for direct WCF. The two main reasons were related to the advantage of the immediate identification of the correct form and also the certainty of the correct answer. As one student put it, 'It is because it would be clearer for me when revising my writing.' Students were concerned that an error code may not lead them to the correct amendments. As one student said, 'If my teacher does not provide the correct answer, then I may not be sure that the one I write can be correct.' The students who preferred indirect coded feedback (32%) noted its benefits in terms of learner autonomy. For example, one student said, 'it will help me in learning from my mistakes and to be more independent in identifying my errors.'

The students' preference for the focus of WCF (what feedback should deal with)

About half of the students (21 or 51.2%) preferred their teachers' WCF to be given on grammar and a third (13 students) wanted feedback on expression. A very small number (7) mentioned that they wished to receive feedback on mechanics. The students felt that grammatical accuracy is very important. As one student stated: 'If my writing grammar is broken, then my essay cannot be read and understood.' Students also felt that it was the teachers' responsibility to help them with identifying their errors in grammar, whereas other

less serious errors, such as errors in mechanics, could be left for them to identify and self-correct. As one student explained, 'I can recognise my spelling mistakes, but grammar is difficult and my teacher should assist me by highlighting all my grammatical mistakes.'

Table 5 summarises our main findings, comparing institutional guidelines, teachers' practices, and their students' preferences for WCF. We note that in terms of the extent of the feedback, the teachers follow the guidelines and these practices accord with the students' preferences. However, there are mismatches in terms of the type of WCF provided and its focus. We discuss our findings in the section that follows, including also our findings concerning the teachers' beliefs.

Table 5. Institutional guidelines, teachers' practices and students' preferences

WCF	Institutional guidelines	Teachers' practices	Students' preferences
Extent	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Type	Indirect	Indirect	Direct
Focus	Grammar (implied)	Mechanics	Grammar

DISCUSSION

This study investigated teachers' practices and their beliefs about WCF in the context of one university in Saudi Arabia, which has a strictly policed WCF policy, and examined the extent to which they are aligned. The study also investigated the students' preferences with respect to WCF and the extent to which they aligned with their teachers' practices.

Our study found that the teachers believed that WCF is important for improving their students' writing and provided comprehensive feedback. Two of the teachers (Andrew and Charles) believed that the comprehensive approach was important to prevent error fossilisation, an opinion they seemed to share with the students. It is interesting to note that Badir, the most experienced teacher of the three, with nine years of teaching experience, was dubious about the benefits of comprehensive feedback. Nevertheless he too followed the institutional guidelines and provided comprehensive WCF. Clearly in this context strict adherence to university policies shaped teachers' practices of WCF and perhaps also their beliefs. This finding is similar to Lee's (2008) findings that teachers tend to use the comprehensive approach in order to abide by their school's policy and a desire to demonstrate to the authorities that they are hard working.

The university guidelines also specified that the feedback should be indirect, using the prescribed error codes. Overall the teachers gave overwhelmingly more indirect (70.3%) than

direct WCF, with some following the policy more closely (e.g., Andrew) than others (e.g., Charles). The interviews, however, revealed that this practice did not align with their beliefs. Andrew and Badir believed that the type of feedback students receive should vary according to students' L2 proficiency, with indirect feedback given to advanced learners and direct to lower proficiency learners. Given that the students in the cohort were of intermediate proficiency, direct feedback may have been more appropriate. Charles too expressed concerns about the effectiveness of indirect WCF for his students. However, all three teachers tended to follow the guidelines because of the university policy and concerns for their tenure. The teachers' practice (and university policy) also did not align with the students' preference for direct feedback.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the feedback was its focus. Although not stated explicitly, given the large number of codes relating to errors in grammar (see Appendix 1), and the focus of the classes on grammar and vocabulary, we presume that the university wanted teachers to focus mainly on accuracy and expression. Yet we found that most of the feedback, particularly the indirect WCF, was given on mechanics and that sometimes errors in syntax and lexis were overlooked even when they interfered with meaning. This focus on mechanics did not accord with the unstated guidelines or with the teachers' reported beliefs. The teachers, in the interviews, emphasized the importance of grammar and vocabulary as areas that should be focused on in WCF. The students too wanted mainly feedback on grammar, errors which they found more difficult to amend than mechanics.

As was reported by other studies (e.g., Montgomery & Baker, 2007), there may be a discrepancy between teachers' self-reports and the actual feedback they provide. Our study found that the teachers underestimated the amount of feedback they provided on mechanics, and overestimated the feedback they provided on grammar and even more so on lexis. For example, Andrew and Charles thought that they focused their WCF on vocabulary, yet lexical errors (i.e., language expression) received the least amount of attention in their WCF practices. Badir, the only teacher who provided an almost equal amount of feedback on errors in grammar and mechanics, also claimed that he provided feedback mainly on grammar. One reason that could explain these findings is expediency. It is easier to use codes to provide feedback on mechanics particularly when teachers are faced with the challenges of providing timely feedback in large classes. Ferris (2006) also found that teachers gave most WCF on spelling mistakes.

Ferris (2002, 2006) suggests that different types of feedback should be given to different types of errors, distinguishing between 'treatable' errors (i.e., errors in structures which are rule-bound and thus can be self-corrected by students) and 'untreatable' errors (i.e., errors that can be difficult to self-correct because the structures have no specific rules). An example of a treatable error is an error in subject-verb agreement; an example of an untreatable error is an error in word choice. Ferris recommends giving indirect feedback on treatable errors

and direct feedback on untreatable errors. A closer analysis of the students' texts in our study showed that treatable grammatical errors were often given direct feedback (e.g., my brother study [studied] in his room yesterday). In contrast, errors in expression, which are considered untreatable, were given indirect feedback, (e.g., advantages and disadvantages of studying outside [WW]) or ignored. These findings suggest that the teachers and indeed the university administrators that determine the feedback policy may not be aware of what may be appropriate feedback for different types of errors.

Our findings concerning the students' preferences for comprehensive direct feedback mainly on grammar are similar to those of previous studies conducted in EFL educational contexts (e.g., Halimi, 2008; Hamouda, 2011). Their expectations were only partially met. They received comprehensive WCF, but most of it focused on mechanics rather than grammar. Furthermore, feedback on grammar tended to be indirect in line with the university policy. This mismatch between students' preference and feedback practices is not surprising. Students' preferences for WCF are rarely elicited in writing classes, and in this context with its strict feedback policy, it is unlikely that students' voices would be taken into account.

We conclude our study by acknowledging that this was a small-scale study, and hence the results are not generalisable to other universities in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, other universities in Saudi Arabia seem to have different policies on feedback, or in fact no policy at all. Thus it would be interesting in future studies to investigate whether teachers' WCF practices and beliefs differ in other institutions to the one in this study.

Nevertheless, our findings support the claims made by a number of researchers (e.g., Casanave, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006) that culturally and historically entrenched expectations, norms and authority relations play a significant role in situating and shaping teachers' feedback practices. In a context where feedback practices are closely monitored, and where there are unequal power relations between the administration and the staff, as was the case in our context, teachers' WCF practices are more likely to adhere to institutional guidelines than follow their own beliefs. Such a context prevents teachers to 'self-actualize a new and more autonomous, responsible role for themselves' (Hamp-Lyons, 2007, p. 495).

These practices are unlikely to change, unless the institution undertakes a review of their policy on WCF. Such a review should involve administrators and teachers and take into consideration all stakeholders' perspectives as well as recent research findings. The review could provide all stakeholders with a forum to discuss different approaches to WCF and an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own WCF strategies and beliefs. We believe that such a review could culminate in a more principled approach to WCF, one that could indeed be more effective and manageable. Rather than adopting a comprehensive and uniform approach to all errors, the approach adopted should take into consideration the type of error (treatable vs. untreatable), the learners' L2 proficiency and their development over time. It is

also important that any policy adopted should then be communicated to the students, so that they too understand the rationale for why certain WCF practices are used by their teachers.

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APPENDIX 1: ERROR CODES

Code	Explanation
VT	Wrong verb tense
WF	Wrong word form
WW	Wrong word
NN	A word or phrase is not necessary
SP	Spelling mistake
P	Punctuation error
RO	Run-on sentence
WO/SS	Wrong word order or sentence structure
SV	Subject verb agreement problem
^	Word or words missing
NC	Incomplete sentence
?	Unclear

APPENDIX 2: STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE (ENGLISH VERSION)

Dear student: The aim of this questionnaire is to investigate your opinions and preferences about the corrective feedback that you receive from your writing teacher.

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

The purpose of this section is for the researchers to know more about you. Remember: you have the right not to answer any of these questions if you feel they are intrusive. (Just tick the correct answer or the most suitable one)

Name (optional): _____

1.   Your mother tongue is Arabic:
        Yes ____   No ____

2.   Your age is:
        18 ____
        Between 18 and 22 _____
        Over 22 _____

3.   How many years have you been studying English in formal education?
        _____ years.

SECTION 2: THIS SECTION IS ABOUT YOUR BELIEFS AND PREFERENCES ABOUT YOUR TEACHER'S WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK GIVEN ON YOUR ENGLISH WRITING ERRORS.

4.   Do you like to receive feedback on your writing from your teacher?

        Yes_____ No _____

5.   Is it important for your teacher to correct all of your writing errors or just select some of them?

        All errors _____   some errors _____

        Please explain your choice:

6. Which categories of your writing would you prefer teacher feedback to be focused on more? Please rank the following from 1 (most important) to 3 (least important).
    a.   Grammar____

    b.   Use and choice of vocabulary ____

    c.   Mechanics (spelling and punctuation) _____

    Please explain your choice:

7. The following are different ways a teacher can respond to errors on students' writing:
    a.   Underline/circle errors

         e.g., he <u>seen</u>

    b.   Underline and provide a hint about the type of error

         e.g., he <u>seen</u> (VT)

    c.   Giving me the correct answer

         e.g., he ~~seen~~ (saw)

    d.   Indicating that there is an error in a particular sentence by placing an X in the margin

         e.g., Yesterday I witness a robbery on my home from school. **X**

Which of the above types of feedback does your teacher give you mostly on your writing

    a.   ___
    b.   ___
    c.   ___
    d.   ___

Other: please specify

Which of the above types of feedback do you want to receive on your writing:

    a.   ___

    b.   ___

    c.   ___

    d.   ___

Other: please specify

Why do you like to receive this type of feedback?

APPENDIX 3: THE TEACHER INTERVIEWS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. Can you tell me which country you come from?
2. Can you tell me about your experience of teaching English and how long have you been teaching English?
3. Can you tell me about your previous studies?
4. Can you tell me about your experience of teaching writing?
5. Have you received any previous training on giving corrective feedback? If so, please describe that experience

WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK PRACTICES:

6. Do you think it is important to give feedback on errors that students make in their writing?
7. Do you give feedback on all students' errors or do you select some of the errors and only give feedback on those selected errors? Can you explain the reasons why you choose selective or comprehensive feedback?
8. Which approach (selective or comprehensive) do you prefer? Why?
9. What type of errors do you tend to focus on in your feedback? Why?
10. What type of errors do you think teachers should focus on in their feedback? Why?
11. Which type of corrective feedback (direct vs. indirect) do you use when giving feedback on writing? Why do you use it?
12. Which type of corrective feedback do you think can be more beneficial for improving students' writing? Can you explain why?
13. Do you ask your students' about their preferences with regard to how much and which type of corrective feedback should be given? Can you explain why/why not?