



## **STRATEGIES AND PERCEPTIONS ON WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN THE GRADE 11 ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS IN GALLE DISTRICT, SRI LANKA**

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<p><b>Received:</b> March 17<sup>th</sup> 2021 <b>Accepted:</b> March 30<sup>th</sup> 2021 <b>Published:</b> April 18<sup>th</sup> 2021</p>	<p>Written corrective feedback (WCF) has recently gained prominence in second language writing (L2) as a number of researchers have looked specifically into its nature and role in L2 teaching and learning. While various studies have investigated the effectiveness of providing WCF, there have been relatively little research incorporating teachers' and students' perspectives and teachers' actual WCF strategies. Thus, the current study adopted features of an ethnographic research design in order to explore teachers' and students' perspectives as well as teachers' feedback practices in the Galle district Ordinary Level English classrooms in three different types of schools in the Sri Lankan context. The present study is purely qualitative due to the lack of qualitative methods used in the research design of previous studies. Seven ESL teachers and seven groups of grade 11 students were selected as the participants. The beliefs and strategies of the teachers and students were elicited through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group interviews. The obtained data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results suggest that both teachers and students identify advantages as well as disadvantages of in providing WCF. Despite its disadvantages, teachers choose to provide feedback and student want and expect feedback from their teachers. The results also suggest that teachers' own beliefs influence their specific styles of providing WCF. Students' preferences regarding WCF have been adapted towards the methods employed by their respective teachers. The analysis of students' essays corrected by teachers showed that there is a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their WCF practices. The results of the current study will contribute to the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) by increasing the understanding of ESL teachers' pedagogical practices and will assist them in adapting their WCF techniques to the needs of their students.</p>

**Keywords:** Feedback strategies, Written Corrective Feedback (WCF), Second language writing, Students' preferences, Teachers' perceptions, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The skills in language are four namely, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. English is not an exception. Brown (2000) explained that, in order to master the English language, learners have to be exposed to all of the four basic skills. Out of the four skills, writing has always been given a prominent role in language learning. Writing has been perceived as the most difficult skill among the four skills of English (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Phuket & Othman, 2015) which demands cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis (Ridha, 2012) where even a native speaker fails to write a good piece of writing. It is even more complicated to write in a second language and it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to become a skillful writer.

Harris and Silva (1993) make the point that writing is a complex activity in the L2 context and that L2 writers are faced with differences between the conventions of first and second language writing. According to Alsamadani (2010), writing in a second language is demanding because it is a complex, challenging, and difficult process since writers are expected to produce written samples that are syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable, and culturally appropriate. Thus, writing should receive more attention in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in order to prepare learners to cope with the communicative demands of real life situations. Undoubtedly, the purpose of teaching writing is to prepare ESL learners to become better writers which is a complex and ongoing process. It has been generally observed due to the above reasons that teaching writing to learners of ESL is one of the most challenging tasks. Becoming an ESL writing teacher is demanding too. The main role of an ESL teacher is to help their

students improve their writing proficiency in accordance with student needs and course objectives. In assisting the learners to successfully acquire writing skills, the analysis of errors, understanding of their sources, and providing written corrective feedback are necessary.

According to Hyland & Hyland (2006), corrective feedback refers to any comment, suggestion, question, request for clarification, elaboration or information provided by the teacher that pertains to the ideas, organization, style and rhetorical structure of the text. To date, the role of written corrective feedback in language acquisition has become a highly controversial issue. Over the years, more studies and reviews conducted, with all of them indicating support to the practice of providing written corrective feedback. However, despite their positive results, some of these studies criticized its potential to make learners employ avoidance strategy, pushing them produce composition with relatively high level of linguistic accuracy but low level of syntactic complexity. Thus, the efficacy of written corrective feedback and its contribution continues to be debated.

However, it is apparent that very few studies (Ferris, 2004) have attempted to explore the actual strategies of providing written corrective feedback and teachers' and students' perceptions on it. It is also apparent that there is a lack of qualitative research into teachers' and students' perceptions regarding written corrective feedback which enables more in-depth exploration. Thus, the present study attempts to address this gap in literature.

Specifically, the current study was guided by the following research questions.

- i. What are the ESL teachers' strategies, and perceptions with regard to giving written corrective feedback?
- ii. What are the students' perspectives towards written corrective feedback?

The results of this study might entail a new perspective in the teaching of L2 writing focusing more on teachers' self-reflection and self-evaluation of their strategies in providing written corrective feedback. Moreover, little is known about the connection between teachers' perspectives and practices in written corrective feedback and the extent to which teachers' practices and students' preferences match. The results of the study will contribute to the field of TESL by increasing the understanding of ESL teachers' pedagogical practices and will assist them in adapting their written corrective feedback to the needs of their students.

## 2.METHODOLOGY

The present study is purely qualitative. A very few studies on written corrective feedback incorporated both teachers and students as participants and most of the aforementioned studies utilized either a qualitative approach ( Ferris,1997; Montgomery & Baker,2007) or mixed methods (Perpignan,2003) presenting a gap in the methodological aspects of current existing research. Therefore, the main contributing factor which determined the choice of a qualitative approach for the present study is the lack of qualitative approaches used in previous studies. The study also adapted features and aspects of an ethnographic research. Yet, the research design is not entirely ethnographic in nature.

This study took place in Galle and the location was selected for the convenience of the researcher. Three schools: a National School, a Type 1AB school and a type 1C school were selected based on the categorization of schools by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Seven experienced English teachers and 35 grade 11 students from three schools were selected as the participants. The present study collected data through different forms ( semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, classroom observations, and collection of written texts) in order to investigate the extent to which teachers' perspectives regarding written corrective feedback translate into their teaching practice and the possible connection between teachers' written corrective feedback strategies and students' preferences.

The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and coded and students' essays which are corrected by teachers were analyzed. After coding the data, the prominent themes and recurring ideas were identified which were later interpreted to draw meaning from it. Thus, the study applied thematic analysis whereby data gathered are categorized into themes and sub-themes so as to be comparable. The research questions were used as initial themes, with more specific sub themes developed as they emerged from the data.

## 3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Teachers' feedback strategies

Teachers' perceptions regarding their strategies of providing written corrective feedback were reflected in their responses during the semi-structured interviews. The results show that teachers' employ different strategies to provide written corrective feedback. The strategies could be summarized in the following aspects.

- Underlining and circling of errors
- Explicit written correction
- Use of error correction codes

It can be summarized that teachers have a set of beliefs about their own written corrective feedback strategies and they differ from one teacher to another. The different patterns of their perceptions and preferences could be interpreted as a reflection of the differences in their previous experiences with regard to the provision of written corrective feedback.

### 3.2 Teacher's perceptions

Teachers' perceptions with regard to written corrective feedback were elicited through semi-structured interviews. After analyzing the data, three key themes were identified from the responses of teachers: (1) advantages, (2)

disadvantages, and (3) importance. Teachers believe that providing written corrective feedback is advantageous in that it

- Generates awareness of their mistakes in writing
- Helps students revise their writing more effectively
- Helps students improve their proofreading skills

Although teachers believe that providing written corrective feedback is beneficial, they also believe that it has its disadvantages. The results of the teachers’ responses during the semi-structured interviews show that teachers believe providing written corrective feedback has disadvantages in the following aspects:

- It takes time
- Demotivates students
- Students might not understand the feedback.

The results of the teachers’ responses during the semi-structured interviews illustrated that teachers believe providing written corrective feedback is important in the following aspects:

- Improves writing accuracy
- Promotes independent learning

**3.3 Correlation between teachers’ strategies and perceptions**

Teachers’ strategies of providing written corrective feedback were observed through students’ writing marked by teachers in order to investigate the correlation between teachers’ strategies and perceptions. Excerpts of recurring responses of teachers during the semi- structured interviews and examples of teacher-corrected students writing were compared to explore whether their beliefs correspond with their strategies. Through the observed strategies of providing written corrective feedback, the following can be inferred.

- Teachers practice written corrective feedback to help their students identify and revise their errors.
- Teachers expect students to become better writers after getting feedback.
- Teachers employ both explicit and implicit methods of written corrective feedback. Their choice depends on their preferences and experiences.
- There is a mismatch between teachers’ strategies and practices.

**3.4 Teachers’ strategies observed through classroom observations**

In order to investigate whether teachers’ feedback strategies match with their perceptions, and what students said they do after receiving written corrective feedback is in line with what they do in reality, classroom observations were conducted.

<b>What teachers said they do</b>	<b>What teachers actually did</b>
They provide enough written corrective feedback	They had to provide oral feedback too
They provide positive feedback only	They provided negative feedback too
They always explain the errors	They explained the errors when asked only
They motivate students to revise their essays	They did not motivate students to revise their essays

**Table 3.1 Teachers’ feedback strategies observed through classroom observations**

During the classroom observations, it was observed that teachers provide oral feedback to students along with written corrective feedback. Though they stated during the semi-structured interviews that they only provide positive feedback to motivate students, the researcher has observed that teachers provide negative feedback too. Teachers also stated that they motivate students to revise their essays after the feedback, yet it was not noticeable during the classroom observations. Moreover, teachers explained the feedback only for the ones who asked for further explanation. Thus, it is evident that teachers’ observed feedback strategies do not correspond with their perceptions.

**3.5 Students’ preferences**

Students’ preferences regarding written corrective feedback were investigated through the focus group interviews. Four key themes were identified from the responses of the students as shown below: (1) strategies, (2) advantages, (3) disadvantages and (4) importance.

The results of the students’ responses during the focus group interviews show how their teachers provide feedback for their teaching. The results could be summarized in the following aspects:

- Underlining and circling of errors
- Explicit written correction
- Use of error correction codes

All the students stated that they want feedback and they like the way their teachers provide written corrective feedback. Also, students expect written corrective feedback from their teachers.

The results of the present study indicated that students believe receiving feedback from their teachers has following advantages:

- Helpful in locating their errors
- Helpful in revising their errors
- Encourage them to learn from their mistakes

Although the students believe that written corrective feedback is beneficial, they also believe that it has following disadvantages:

- It is difficult to understand the teachers’ feedback
- It is confusing as to how to correct the errors in writing
- It is time consuming

**3.6 Teacher’s feedback strategies and students’ preferences**

The preferences of students regarding written corrective feedback have been adapted towards the methods employed by their teachers. In other words, it can be inferred that regardless of the types of written corrective feedback and disadvantages, the preferences of students will adapt accordingly in order to make full use of their teachers’ written corrective feedback.

**3.7 Students’ behaviors observed through classroom observations**

During the classroom observations, it was observed that what students said they do after receiving written corrective feedback is in line with what they do in reality. However, the results of classroom observations showed that there is a mismatch between what students said they do and what they did in reality.

What students said they do	What they did
Students stated that they want, expect and value teachers’ feedback	Students compared their essays with their peers. Students focused more on their marks than the feedback Students focused more on ticks they got from the teachers than crossed out or underlined words.
Students stated teachers’ very important for them to become better writers.	Those who got less feedback from teachers seemed content.  One or two students asked for further explanation.
Students stated that they revise the essays after the feedback	Most of the students did not consider teachers’ feedback at all.

**Table 3.2 Students’ behaviors observed through classroom observations**

**4.IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study have several significant implications for both teaching and teacher education.

**4.1 Implication for teaching**

The results of the present study implicated that ESL teachers’ own beliefs influence their specific styles of providing written corrective feedback for their students’ writing. Therefore, it can be argued that there may be a need for reflection on the teacher’s part to become more conscious regarding written corrective feedback they utilize. Thus, ESL teachers should be helped to examine and reflect on their own strategies critically, and to do classroom research into alternative ways of providing written corrective feedback. Since teachers provide written corrective feedback in accordance with their beliefs, they should be able to adapt their written corrective feedback strategies in a way that addresses writing weaknesses unique to each individual students. Hence, there is also the need of encouraging a more open and reflective attitude to provide written corrective feedback. The awareness of the effectiveness of written corrective feedback on learners’ writing accuracy can also have implications for language assessment. The knowledge of how various feedback mode influence learners’ writing accuracy can help teachers make more informed decisions as to how to provide written corrective feedback and how to assess learners’ writing. Finally, by taking the students’ preferences into consideration, a learner-centered approach can be encouraged and learners may improve their writing.

**4.2 Implications for teacher education**

While it is like that most ESL teachers will have a clear idea about the need to provide their learners with written corrective feedback, some may not have a good understanding of what constitutes effective written corrective feedback. Therefore, before any training occurs, teacher trainers will need to assess the extent to which their trainees already possess the knowledge and skills their training program focuses on. The results of this study imply that teachers undergoing training should receive additional instruction on the different ways of providing written corrective feedback and employing effective written corrective feedback strategies. It was evident that teachers have no specific marking techniques and approach, which has resulted in the efficiency and unsystematic practices of providing written corrective feedback. Furthermore, when preparing teacher training syllabi, it is necessary to include self-evaluation strategies to reflect on teachers’ own strategies in providing written corrective feedback.

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the major drawbacks of this study was that the researcher could not observe each and every classroom for a longer period. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to observe each class for a longer period. However, it would have been better to observe classrooms for a longer period to get detailed information on teachers' actual strategies of written corrective feedback in the classroom. Similarly, students' responses and teacher-student interactions could be elicited through classroom observation in order to supply follow-up questions for interviews.

The participants in this research were limited to only seven ESL teachers and seven groups of grade 11 students. It would have been better to conduct interviews on a wider scope of participants who belong to different ages, with different English proficiency levels, and diverse ESL learning experiences. Due to time constraints, a longer time frame for data collection was not possible and data for this study was collected within a period of ten weeks. Thus, it is recommended that future research could be conducted in a longitudinal manner.

Furthermore, most of the data collected in the study came from interview responses which were self-reported in nature. Thus, it is possible that the responses of the teachers and students might not exactly reflect their actual beliefs and preferences. Self-reported answers may be exaggerated, respondents may be too embarrassed to reveal their personal beliefs and various biases may affect the results. Therefore, future research may utilize other data collection methods such as questionnaires with interviews to elicit a richer depth of information.

Overall, the improvement in the limitations of the study would be necessary to future studies in order to draw solid conclusions with regard to teachers' perspectives, practices, and students' preferences in written corrective feedback.

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