



# Less is NOT more for learners: EFL learners' preferences and perceptions of teachers' written corrective feedback

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have debated whether comprehensive or focused written corrective feedback is more beneficial for EFL learners; however, learner preferences have not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, this study examined adult EFL learners' preferences and perceptions regarding teachers' written corrective feedback, focusing on a number of key aspects: perceived importance, preferred degree of comprehensiveness, preferred focus, preferred timing, preferred type (direct vs. indirect), and method of presenting feedback. A mixed-methods approach was employed, using a questionnaire to obtain quantitative data from 143 Saudi EFL learners enrolled at a Saudi university. Additionally, retrospective semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative data from a subset of 49 participants. The findings revealed that participants highly valued teacher feedback and recognized its vital role in their writing development. As opposed to the prevalent assumption that "less is more," participants collectively preferred comprehensive feedback that addresses various aspects of writing, including language, content, organization, and overall quality. They preferred feedback on the multiple drafts, particularly regarding content and organization. Moreover, participants preferred a combination of direct and indirect feedback methods, offering specific guidance, detailed explanations, and opportunities for self-correction. Participants emphasized the importance of clear, specific, and actionable feedback and the motivational impact of positive and encouraging comments. The preferences for comprehensive feedback and explicit guidance are crucial for informing EFL teaching practices and curriculum development. Furthermore, pedagogical implications and practical recommendations are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Feedback is an integral part of the assessment of written content (Al-Ahmad et al., 2023). Although various types of feedback exist, teachers' written corrective feedback (WCF) remains prominent (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Lee, 2017; Liu, 2024). WCF plays a vital role in the development of writing skills of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It provides EFL learners with valuable insights into their writing performance, helps them identify areas for improvement, and guides them toward effective writing strategies (Cheng et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2024; Mao & Lee, 2022). Moreover, WCF supports EFL learners in meeting the demands of academic writing and prepares them for their future professional careers (Bahrouni & Tuzlukova, 2019; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

The efficacy and optimal approach to teachers' WCF in EFL contexts have been the subject of ongoing debate among researchers and practitioners. Lee (2019) argued that "less is more" when it comes to

teachers' WCF and posited that comprehensive WCF could overwhelm and discourage EFL learners, negatively affecting their motivation and persistence. Instead, Lee advocated for a focused and balanced approach to feedback that emphasizes writing competence rather than solely focusing on grammatical accuracy. However, researchers such as McLellan (2021) refuted this perspective and argued that students who received comprehensive feedback demonstrated greater improvements in grammar and organization than those who received minimal feedback. Moreover, McLellan contended that this argument is culturally specific; particularly, learners in Asian contexts expect detailed guidance and may struggle to improve if only a few errors are addressed. Overall, studies have been divided on this issue, with some supporting Lee's suggestion (e.g., Rasool et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2021; Suerni et al., 2020) and others refuting it (e.g., Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, & Alsahil, 2024b; Geçkin, 2020). The present study contributes to this debate by investigating Saudi EFL learners' views with regard to their teachers' corrective feedback and the degrees of comprehensiveness they

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prefer.

### 1.1. Significance of the study

Learner preferences are a crucial consideration in the provision of WCF, as they can influence learners' engagement with and uptake of feedback (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2024). Feedback that aligns with learner preferences is more likely to be perceived as valuable and motivating, leading to improved writing outcomes (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Lee, 2008; Mao et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2021). Mao et al. (2024), in their review, highlighted the importance of contextualizing WCF practices and tailoring feedback to student needs and specific contexts. Identifying learners' preferences can help teachers understand how to tailor their feedback to meet learners' expectations, making it more accessible (Fitriyah et al., 2024). It also informs teachers' practices with regard to their feedback practices (Leow, 2023; Yang et al., 2021). This, in turn, will foster a more positive learning environment and strengthen the teacher-student relationship (Yang et al., 2021).

While the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) is not solely determined by learners' preferences, aligning teachers' WCF practices with EFL learners' preferences is crucial (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2024). When students feel that their needs and preferences are acknowledged, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated in the learning process (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2024). This engagement is essential for students to actively process and internalize feedback, which will positively impact their learning (Fitriyah et al., 2024). Additionally, when students feel that the feedback is relevant and useful, they are more likely to incorporate the feedback, which is crucial for improvement (Fitriyah et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, many mismatches occur between teachers' practices when delivering WCF and EFL learners' preferences (Abdel Latif, Alsuhailani, & Alsahil, 2024b; Fitriyah et al., 2024). Recent research has profiled the feedback practices of EFL writing teachers (Abdel Latif et al., 2024b, b; Cheng et al., 2021; Fitriyah et al., 2024). However, various aspects of learner preferences for WCF, such as the feedback focus (e.g., language, content, organization), feedback timing (e.g., drafts or final versions), methods of feedback delivery (e.g., direct or indirect), and presentation have not been sufficiently explored. Additionally, recent studies established the existence of cultural and contextual factors affecting teachers' WCF practices and learners' preferences (Cheng et al., 2021; Kessler & Casal, 2024; Liu, 2024; Mao et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2024). Therefore, this study, which examined Saudi EFL learners' preferences for teachers' WCF, is expected to contribute to the existing growing body of research in this area by including evidence from a different cultural context.

### 1.2. Study's objectives and research questions

This study aimed to evaluate EFL learners' perceptions regarding the significance of teachers' WCF and examine their preferences regarding the feedback's degree of comprehensiveness, type, timing, focus, and method of presentation. As this study focuses on teachers' WCF, reference to *feedback* and *error correction* hereafter refers to those provided by EFL teachers (unless indicated otherwise). It intends to answer the following research question:

1. What are EFL learners' perceptions regarding the teachers' WCF in terms of:

- a) relative importance and significance?
- b) degree of comprehensiveness?
- c) focus of feedback (e.g., language, content, organization)?
- d) timing of feedback?
- f) type of feedback (direct vs. indirect) and method of presenting feedback?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The value of teachers' WCF: A general consensus with nuances

Most studies on teachers' WCF acknowledge the importance of WCF in second language (L2) writing (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2024; Rasool et al., 2023). EFL students generally consider teachers' WCF as a valuable tool for improving their writing (Kessler & Casal, 2024; Leow, 2023). They believe that feedback helps them enhance their writing skills and become better writers (Leow, 2023; Rasool et al., 2024). For instance, Lee (2008) examined Hong Kong secondary school students and revealed learners' strong desire for teachers' feedback, even if the suggestions were sometimes hard to understand or put into practice. Similarly, Alkhatib (2015) concluded that Arab EFL students considered teachers' feedback highly important; they appreciated not only its immediate corrective function but also its long-term effects on language development. Contrary to these findings, some students may find WCF frustrating or unhelpful (Yu et al., 2021).

While EFL learners generally accept WCF as beneficial for their writing, this acceptance comes with conditions (Mao et al., 2024). Many students view feedback as a tool to enhance their accuracy and eliminate errors, reflecting a product-focused approach (Lee, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). This is likely due to traditional learning settings that emphasize explicit grammar instruction and error detection (Cheng et al., 2021). A critical perspective, however, suggests that WCF should foster self-monitoring and engagement with one's own writing (Mao & Lee, 2022). Additionally, students' appreciation of feedback is tied to its clarity, usefulness, and perceived impact on writing skills (Fitriyah et al., 2024). Unclear feedback or an overwhelming amount of corrections can diminish its perceived value (Lee, 2017). Positive comments and acknowledgment of effort were found crucial for student motivation (Yu et al., 2021). However, although learners generally value feedback, their preferences for feedback type vary widely.

### 2.2. Degree of complexity and comprehensiveness of teachers' WCF

Recent research has targeted learner preferences for the complexity and comprehensiveness of WCF in various EFL contexts, yielding a range of learner preferences, which may indicate a controversial aspect of the debate. The debate over comprehensive versus focused WCF illustrated that no single approach is universally favored (Mao et al., 2024). As noted above, Lee (2019) argued that feedback focused on critical errors is superior to comprehensive feedback, as it is not overwhelming for learners, allowing students to concentrate on aspects crucial for improvement without being demoralized by many corrections. This argument is based on the cognitive load theory, indicating that learners can process and apply feedback successfully when feedback is targeted and not onerous. Specifically, for learners with lower proficiency, focused feedback is deemed more suitable (Lee, 2017). Such views were evidenced in a later study by Lee et al. (2021). The study revealed that when aligned with instruction and tailored to students' needs, focused WCF can be effective. Similarly, other studies argued that focused feedback gives students an opportunity to concentrate on specific areas, potentially leading to improved uptake and learning (Lee, 2019; Leow, 2023).

Moreover, Saragih et al. (2021) concluded that students preferred focused feedback that targeted selected aspects rather than comprehensive corrections of all errors in their writing. Learners valued feedback that helped them improve their overall writing skills, such as content development and organization, rather than only surface-level language errors. Correcting all errors did not prove efficient. Participants would find their writing a mess due to many corrections written on the paper, leading to discouragement. From their point of view, the feedback given should focus on what they called "crucial errors/mistakes." Likewise, Suerni et al. (2020) found that EFL learners preferred selective feedback on specific error types and linguistic features.

However, students valued receiving feedback that targeted content and organization, thus calling for a balanced approach beyond error correction.

Comprehensive WCF (i.e., unfocused) has traditionally been favored, with teachers marking all errors (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). It was driven by the belief that students need to be aware of all their mistakes. Some students favor comprehensive feedback, as they believe it provides a complete overview of their writing (Van Beuningen, 2010). They believe that receiving more feedback results in greater improvement (Yang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this approach was criticized to be overwhelming, especially for lower-proficiency students (Lee, 2017).

McLellan (2021) found that students who received comprehensive feedback made significantly more progress than those who received minimal feedback. This finding contradicts Lee's argument that overwhelming students with feedback can lead to confusion and demotivation. McLellan suggests that comprehensive feedback leads to better outcomes, especially in terms of grammar, organization, and word order, indicating that students can simultaneously address multiple types of errors. In McLellan's study, the class that received more detailed feedback exhibited greater overall improvement in both grammar and organizational skills than classes with limited feedback. Moreover, McLellan emphasized the importance of context; for instance, in Asian educational environments, such as Japan, students often expect and rely on detailed feedback.

Geçkin's (2020) results are in line with those of McLellan (2021). Geçkin found that learners of all proficiency levels preferred multiple draft corrections for all errors. Learners believed that more detailed and extensive feedback would result in greater improvements in their L2 writing. Falhasiri (2021) conducted a review of the existing literature and empirical studies that supported this finding. Falhasiri argued that comprehensive feedback provides learners with a full picture of their writing performance. This approach allows students to address a wide range of issues in their writing, likely leading to substantial improvements over time. Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b) examined EFL learners' preferences and found that most students expected their teachers to comprehensively and explicitly evaluate all textual aspects of their essays.

Similarly, Rasool et al. (2023) indicated a strong inclination toward direct, unfocused feedback. Students believe that comprehensive feedback helps them identify more errors and learn more. Participants in their study preferred feedback on grammatical errors, content, organization, and language use. In their later study, Rasool et al. (2024), confirmed EFL learners' preferences for unfocused, direct feedback even though they came from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

This disagreement between preferences for comprehensive or focused feedback underscores the complexity of the issue and suggests that preferences may depend on the specific context, the student's language proficiency, and their individual learning styles (Zhang et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence of a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices in this regard (Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019).

### 2.3. Directness of teachers' WCF

The directness of feedback, such as providing the correct answer (direct) or prompting students to find the error (indirect), also impacts students' perceptions (Mao et al., 2024). There is strong evidence that many students prefer direct WCF, valuing the clarity and explicit corrections provided (Lee, 2017). Chen et al. (2016) revealed a strong preference for explicit feedback among university students, highlighting the influence of cultural and educational contexts on feedback perceptions. Elwood and Bode (2014) emphasized the importance of motivational feedback and found that university EFL students favored direct corrective and motivational feedback.

Suerni et al. (2020) and Saragih et al. (2021) revealed that EFL

learners positively perceived WCF and preferred direct corrections to opportunities for self-correction and interactive revisions. Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b) demonstrated that the vast majority of EFL students preferred direct, concise, and informative teachers' feedback. Teachers' preferences do not always align with learners' preferences in this respect, as many teachers revealed some preference for indirect WCF because it encourages learners to reflect on their mistakes and become more aware of them (Abdel Latif et al., 2024a; Lee, 2017; Lee et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is evidence of inconsistencies between what teachers believe about WCF and what they actually do in the classroom because their practices are influenced by contextual factors such as workload and school policies (Cheng et al., 2021; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). According to Lee (2017), indirect feedback encourages learner autonomy and critical thinking by encouraging students to self-correct.

As noted earlier regarding the degree of comprehensiveness, some research suggests that students' preferences for direct or indirect feedback can also be influenced by cultural factors (Mahboob, 2017). This disagreement underscores the complexity of the issue and suggests that preferences may depend on the specific context, the student's language proficiency, and their individual learning styles (Chen et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021).

### 2.4. Teachers' WCF timing

The timing of feedback is crucial for its effectiveness (Reynolds, 2023). Li's (2010) meta-analysis suggested that WCF effectiveness is influenced by contextual factors, such as feedback timing, learners' language proficiency, and feedback type. Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b) confirmed that most EFL learners preferred to receive teacher feedback on at least two drafts, whereas most teachers provided feedback on only one draft. Similarly, some studies depict that learners benefit from iterative feedback and revision, with student engagement changing over time (Lee, 2008). Geçkin's (2020) found that EFL learners preferred multiple draft corrections for all errors. Similarly, Fitriyah et al. (2024) found that EFL learners who struggled to comprehend teachers' WCF at the first draft benefitted from feedback on other drafts, ensuring the effectiveness of iterative feedback on multiple drafts. Moreover, the timing of feedback is significant for student engagement and uptake of teachers' WCF (Mao et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that students benefit from feedback at all stages of the writing process (Mao et al., 2024).

### 2.5. Teachers' WCF focus

Several studies have investigated learner preferences regarding the focus of teachers' WCF, including aspects such as language, content, organization, and the overall quality of writing. There is evidence that teachers often prioritize local errors (grammar and mechanics), while students desire feedback on global issues (content and organization) (Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Indeed, a major concern in WCF is the tendency for teachers to focus on language errors rather than content and organization (Mao et al., 2024). This focus aligns with traditional language instruction that prioritizes accuracy (Cheng et al., 2021). This is partially in line with the findings of Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b), who observed that EFL learners preferred feedback on both text organization and grammar, but not on vocabulary, as they were still in the process of developing it. Some researchers, such as Lee (2017), have advocated for a balanced approach that addresses both language and higher-order concerns, emphasizing its importance for holistic writing development.

Moreover, the focus of feedback can be influenced by the stage of the writing process. For instance, some teachers focus on content and organization in early drafts and language in later drafts (Bahrouni & Tuzlukova, 2019). Rasool et al. (2024) concluded that EFL learners prefer to receive metalinguistic explanations of the errors. They prefer

that the teacher explains why some errors are incorrect.

## 2.6. Method of presenting teachers' WCF

Feedback presentation methods have become more salient with the emergence of new digital tools to support writing and feedback. Color use, electronic versus handwritten modes, and specific marking techniques are diverse aspects of feedback presentation that have been the subject of research. Sheen (2007) reported that various types of errors highlighted in different colors helped students easily notice and remember corrections. However, Lee (2008) warned that the color of red ink may feel excessive or even negative to some students, implying sensitivity to color choice.

The debate on electronic and handwritten feedback has yielded mixed results. For instance, Elola and Oskoz (2010) revealed that students were more focused on electronic than handwritten feedback because the readability was clearer and revisiting comments was easier. Similarly, Ene and Upton (2018) demonstrated that electronic feedback was more comprehensive and readable than handwritten comments. However, Chang et al. (2012) noted that students preferred the personal touch of handwritten feedback and found it more engaging. Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b) found that EFL learners did not report a clear preference for electronic or handwritten teacher feedback.

Positive comments and acknowledgment of effort are important for student motivation (Yu et al., 2021). Rasool et al. (2024) concluded that only some learners find error codes helpful. Others feel demotivated and discouraged by complex feedback, such as circles and underlining, especially when no explanations or adjustments are provided. This type of feedback can be frustrating, and some learners believe that undocumented or unexplained codes only increase their uncertainty. Mao et al. (2024) highlighted that the use of error codes may also be dependent on the student's language proficiency, with lower-proficiency learners preferring more explicit feedback.

Thus, previous results are controversial with regard to learners' preferences for various aspects of teachers' WCF. The field of WCF is complex and characterized by conflicting results and multiple influencing factors (Mao et al., 2024). The findings consistently indicate that EFL learners value teachers' feedback as a crucial component of their writing development, often preferring specific types of feedback that align with their learning needs. The debate surrounding the complexity and comprehensiveness of feedback reveals contrasting preferences among learners, with many scholars advocating for focused feedback that addresses critical errors rather than exhaustive corrections. Similarly, varying viewpoints have been reported regarding other characteristics of teachers' WCF. Considering the controversial and complex nature of the field, the present study aims to contribute to this debate by investigating EFL learners' preferences with regard to multiple aspects of their teachers' WCF. It provides insights from the Saudi EFL context, contributing to the discussion of the effect of various cultural contexts on EFL learners' preferences. Additionally, while most previous studies have focused on a specific aspect of feedback, such as directness or comprehensiveness, the present study examines EFL learners' preferences for teachers' WCF across multiple aspects.

## 2.7. Preferences vs. effectiveness

Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) found that students' perceptions of the usefulness of various types of feedback did not always align with those suggested by research as the most effective. This creates an additional challenge for teachers, who must balance learner preferences with pedagogical best practices.

It is worth noting that the effectiveness of WCF is not a simple matter. Some research suggests that if not provided systematically, WCF can negatively impact students' writing performance (Rasool et al., 2023). The positive impact of WCF can be influenced by the way it is delivered, the type of feedback, and the student's individual learning style (Lee,

2019). Therefore, it is important to understand how students perceive feedback and how their perceptions can interact with the effectiveness of WCF (Salami & Kadawardi, 2022).

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach and combined quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of EFL learners' preferences and perceptions regarding WCF in the university context. A mixed methods approach provides a comprehensive perspective for exploring the themes under investigation (Dornyei, 2007).

### 3.1. Context of the study

Earlier research has highlighted the effect of context and contextual factors on EFL learners' preferences and teachers' practices regarding WCF (Cheng et al., 2021; Fitriyah et al., 2024; Lee & Mohebbi, 2020; Leow, 2023; Lira-Gonzales et al., 2021). This study was conducted in the Department of English Language and Literature at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Arabic is the official language of the country. English is introduced as a compulsory subject in elementary school and continues through secondary education, primarily focusing on grammar, reading, and writing. The English department at which the study was conducted offers programs in English language and literature, as well as Translation. English is taught as a foreign language in both programs. Students who enroll at this program are all EFL learners who speak Arabic as their first language. As English is not the primary language of communication in the broader society, EFL learners in these programs often face challenges in developing proficiency, particularly in academic and professional contexts. The curriculum of the Department of English Language and Literature integrates courses in grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Faculty members, primarily non-native English speakers, employ a mix of traditional and communicative teaching approaches.

### 3.2. Participants

The participants were 143 Saudi students aged 18–24 years ( $M = 21.9$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). The valid response rate was 61 % (out of total invitations 234). The participants formed a homogenous group of adult EFL learners in Saudi Arabia enrolled in an English Language bachelor's program at a Saudi university. They were enrolled at Level three within the first year of their study in a four-year English Language, Literature, and Translation program. At the time of the study, the participants were enrolled in the Writing II course, having completed the Writing I course. This study was approved by the university's review board. The learners' proficiency levels were intermediate. The participants' English proficiency was determined based on their performance in the Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP).<sup>1</sup> Their average score on the test was 61.4 out of 100 ( $M = 61.4$ ,  $SD = 3.7$ ). An intermediate level is suitable for this research because learners at this stage typically have some experience with writing in English and receiving feedback, enabling them to provide meaningful insights about their preferences. Besides, they have had experience in formal writing instruction in the Writing I course. By focusing on learners at a specific intermediate level, the study ensured that the feedback preferences and perceptions were assessed within a group that had comparable language skills and academic needs. This is in line with previous research, which indicated that EFL learners' preferences with regard to their teachers' WCF may be affected by learners' proficiency level (Rasool et al., 2024). Additionally, it supports Cheng et al.'s (2021) and Lee et al.'s (2017) observation that student proficiency level is one of several contextual factors that influence

<sup>1</sup> <https://etec.gov.sa/en/service/step/servicegoal>



teachers' feedback practices. Accordingly, a homogenous group of intermediate-English proficiency levels is expected to provide concise data.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Participants were selected using convenience sampling. The participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Informed consent was ensured by including an introductory questionnaire section that stated the aim of the instrument, confirmed the confidentiality of respondents' personal information and use of data for research purposes only, and informed them that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. After completing the questionnaire, the participants were invited to participate in retrospective semi-structured interviews; 49 participants from the initial sample volunteered to participate in retrospective semi-structured interviews. There were 21 male and 28 female interviewees. The researcher and two colleagues (one male and one female) interviewed them.

### 3.3. Data collection tools and procedures

#### 3.3.1. Questionnaire

Quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire containing nine close-ended questions, with responses rated on four- or five-point Likert scales (Appendix A). Two items (Nos. 5 and 9) comprised sub-questions (Nos. 4 and 6, respectively). The questionnaire was divided into five sections: the perceived importance of teachers' WCF, preferred degree of comprehensiveness of teachers' WCF, focus of WCF, type of WCF, and methods of WCF presentation. The items in the questionnaire were primarily adapted from earlier studies (Ferris, 1995; Leki, 1991), ensuring content validity. Moreover, the study instruments (questionnaire and interviews) were evaluated and reviewed by four experienced specialists holding PhDs in EFL teaching. Their feedback led to multiple revisions. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to facilitate the respondents' understanding. The quality of the translation was assessed by back-translation into English, ensuring it aligned with the original questionnaire. Additionally, eight learners responded to the questionnaire and interview in a pilot study, and their recommendations regarding clarity and wording were considered. The reliability of the instrument was assessed by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.820, indicating a statistically acceptable reliability.

#### 3.3.2. Interviews

Retrospective semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, and the reasoning behind their preferences. Interviews consisted of 21 questions that allowed participants to elaborate their opinions regarding teachers' WCF (Appendix B). These were categorized into six sub-sections: perceived importance of teachers' WCF, learners' reactions to WCF, preferred degree of comprehensiveness, focus of WCF, type of WCF, and preferred method of presentation of feedback. The last question provided learners with the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect of WCF. The questions were validated and piloted, as described above. The required rewording of some questions was conducted as suggested by the validators. Participants' consent was obtained to record and

reproduce their comments as needed. The duration of interviews lasted between 17 and 25 min.

#### 3.3.3. Procedures

The study was conducted during the academic year 2023/2024. Participants received electronic questionnaire links (in Google Forms) via their university e-mail accounts. Their responses were anonymous. They were encouraged to be candid with the assurance that their feedback would not affect their course grades. After completing the electronic questionnaire, one item asked participants if they would volunteer in the retrospective interview by providing their email addresses. The interviews were conducted using Zoom, audio-recorded, and transcribed. The accuracy of the transcription was evaluated using an EFL PhD holder. Subsequently, the transcripts underwent a thematic coding process that involved multiple readings, coding extracts based on their relevance to the research questions, and categorization of these codes under broader themes.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to summarize the participants' perceptions of teachers' WCF. SPSS 24 was used for quantitative analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge from the data. The participants' responses were transcribed. Following Saldana (2009), the data were manually coded using content analysis and thematic coding. Codes were generated, categorized into units, and further synthesized into six main themes by two coders, whose inter-individual reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa. The kappa value was 0.78, indicating a high level of agreement (McHugh, 2012). After manual coding, NVivo 11 was used to organize the data and explore patterns and relationships.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Quantitative data analysis

#### 4.1.1. Perceived importance of the teachers' WCF

Table 2 presents the frequencies and percentages of the participants' opinions on the importance of teachers' WCF in their English writing. Most participants considered error correction by teachers to be very important or important. Some had a neutral opinion, while, a few found it not important at all. However, none considered it unimportant.

Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages of the participants' reported actions when reviewing feedback and error corrections provided by their teachers. Most participants reported carefully reading the corrections and correcting all errors, whereas some indicated reading the corrections and correcting major errors. A few participants reported reading the corrections but not correcting the errors, or not reading the corrections at all.

#### 4.1.2. Preferred degree of comprehensiveness

Table 4 displays the frequencies and percentages of the participants' perceptions of the extended comments provided by their teachers. Most participants considered extended comments very important or important to their learning processes. Some had neutral opinions, and a few found them unimportant or not important at all.

Table 5 presents the frequencies and percentages of participants' preferences for error correction by teachers when many errors are present in their writing. Most participants preferred teachers to correct all errors, while many preferred teachers to correct major errors but not minor ones. Some preferred teachers to correct only errors that interfered with communicating ideas, and a few preferred teachers to focus on content rather than correct grammatical errors.

**Table 1**  
Participant characteristics (N = 143).

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Gender	Men	68 (47.6 %)
	Women	75 (52.4 %)
	Other	0 (0 %)
Age	18–20 years	58 (40.6 %)
	21–24 years	85 (59.4 %)
English proficiency	Avg. = 61.4	143 (100 %)

**Table 2**

Participants' opinions on the importance of teachers' WCF.

Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Not Important at All	Mean	SD
80 (55.9 %)	40 (28.0 %)	20 (14.0 %)	0 (0.0 %)	3 (2.1 %)	53.2	3.8

**Table 3**

Participants' reactions to teachers' WCF (N = 143).

I do not read them	I read them but do not correct the errors	I read them and correct the major errors	I read them carefully and correct all errors	Mean	SD
3 (2.1 %)	13 (9.1.0 %)	47 (32.90 %)	80 (55.9 %)	62.04	3.90

#### 4.1.3. Focus of teachers' WCF

Table 6 exhibits the frequencies and percentages of the participants' preferences for the focus of teachers' comments. Comments on the overall quality of writing were considered very important by the highest percentage of participants, followed closely by comments on content and organization. Comments on grammar were also deemed very important by many participants. Most participants found all comment types to be either very important or important, whereas only a few considered them neutral or unimportant.

Table 7 presents the frequencies and percentages of participants' preferences for different types of language error correction. The correction of grammatical errors was the most preferred, followed by correction of spelling, vocabulary, organization, and punctuation errors.

#### 4.1.4. Timing of teachers' WCF

Table 8 illustrates the frequencies and percentages of participants' preferences regarding the timing of WCF during the writing process. For language errors, most participants preferred to receive feedback on all drafts, followed by preferring feedback only on the first draft. For content, most participants preferred to receive feedback on the first draft, followed by preferring feedback on all drafts. For both grammar and content, few participants preferred feedback on the second and final drafts.

#### 4.1.5. Type and method of presenting teachers' WCF

Table 9 displays the frequencies and percentages of the participants' preferences for WCF types (direct vs. indirect) and presentation methods. The most preferred technique was indirect feedback, which

comprised underlining the error and directing the learner to a source of information, as well as direct feedback, which comprised correcting the error and providing an explanation for the correction. Moreover, most participants considered locating the error and indicating the error type useful or very useful. Many participants found asking classmates to correct errors useful or very useful. The least preferred technique was indicating the type of error without locating or correcting it.

#### 4.2. Qualitative data analysis

A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes and patterns related to EFL learners' preferences for and perceptions of WCF. The following main themes emerged:

1. Multifaceted role of teachers' WCF in facilitating learning and improvement;
2. Critical importance of comprehensive feedback;
3. Nuanced preferences for feedback on various aspects of writing;
4. Significance of timely and frequent feedback;
5. Necessity for clear, specific, and actionable feedback;
6. Balanced approach to direct and indirect feedback methods;
7. Impact of critical feedback on learners' motivation;
8. Various preferences regarding delivery and presentation of teachers' WCF.

Below is the presentation and discussion of the key themes.

Theme 1: Multifaceted role of teachers' WCF in facilitating learning and improvement.

The first significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the multifaceted role of feedback in facilitating learning and improvement. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of feedback in helping them learn from mistakes, improve their writing skills, and develop critical thinking abilities. Participant 38 stated that teachers' corrective feedback is “*extremely*” significant.

Many participants (41 of 49) viewed feedback as an essential tool for identifying areas of improvement and guiding their learning processes. Participant 22 stated, “*Feedback is important to develop my writing skills and to identify errors and try to avoid them in the future.*” Similarly,

**Table 4**

Participants' perceptions of teachers' extended comments.

Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Not Important at All	Mean	SD
60 (42 %)	60 (42 %)	33 (23.1 %)	10 (7 %)	7 (4.9 %)	42.5	3.43

**Table 5**

Participants' preferences for the amount of teachers' error correction.

My teacher should correct all errors	My teacher should correct major errors but not minor ones	My teacher should only correct errors that interfere with communicating ideas	My teacher should not correct grammatical errors, and should focus on content only	Mean	SD
83 (58.0 %)	37 (25.9 %)	20 (14.0 %)	3 (2.1 %)	47.6	3.21

**Table 6**

Participants' preferences for the focus of teachers' WCF.

Item	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Mean	SD
Comments on content	90 (62.9 %)	37 (25.9 %)	16 (11.2 %)	0 (0.0 %)	47.6	0.69
Comments on grammar	87 (60.8 %)	50 (35.0 %)	3 (2.1 %)	0 (0.0 %)	46.6	0.54
Comments on organization	90 (62.9 %)	37 (25.9 %)	20 (14.0 %)	0 (0.0 %)	49	0.72
Comments on overall writing quality	93 (65.0 %)	37 (25.9 %)	10 (7.0 %)	3 (2.1 %)	46.7	0.71

**Table 7**

Participants' preferences for the focus of teachers' WCF on their language.

Grammatical errors	Vocabulary errors	Spelling errors	Organization errors	Punctuation errors	Mean	SD
90 (62.9 %)	63 (44.1 %)	83 (58 %)	60 (42 %)	53 (37.1 %)	74.02	3.07

**Table 8**

Participants' preferences for the timing of WCF.

Item	First draft	Second draft	All drafts	Final draft	Mean	SD
Preferred timing of feedback on language errors in writing	50 (35.0 %)	17 (11.9 %)	56 (39.2 %)	20 (14.0 %)	35.75	2.73
Preferred timing of feedback on writing content	57 (39.9 %)	23 (16.1 %)	50 (35.0 %)	10 (7.0 %)	35	3.04

**Table 9**

Participants' preferences for WCF techniques.

Item	Very Useful	Useful	Useless	Very Useless	Mean	SD
Underlining the error without correcting it	43 (30.1 %)	43 (30.1 %)	40 (28.0 %)	17 (11.9 %)	35.75	0.65
Underlining the error and then directing you to a source for information	87 (60.8 %)	53 (37.1 %)	3 (2.1 %)	0 (0.0 %)	35.8	0.66
Indicating the type of error without locating or correcting it	27 (18.9 %)	37 (25.9 %)	43 (30.1 %)	37 (25.9 %)	36	0.66
Locating the error (e.g., by underlining it) and indicating the type of error	73 (51.0 %)	43 (30.1 %)	23 (16.1 %)	3 (2.1 %)	35.5	0.66
Correcting the error and then providing an explanation for the correction	87 (60.8 %)	37 (25.9 %)	20 (14.0 %)	0 (0.0 %)	36	0.66
Asking my classmate(s) to correct the error	33 (23.1 %)	77 (53.8 %)	13 (9.1 %)	20 (14.0 %)	35.75	0.66

Participant 17 stated that “*knowing errors and how to correct them greatly improved the writing skill.*” This perspective was shared by Participant 38, who said, “*The teacher's feedback helps me understand the expectations for academic writing and how to meet them.*” When asked if they would prefer to receive a grade without their teachers' WCF, 42 participants replied “no” or “definitely no.” Participant 35 stated, “*A grade with no rationale behind it is always confusing.*”

Moreover, participants highlighted the motivational aspect of receiving their teachers' WCF, noting that it encouraged them to continue learning and improving. Participant 1 stated, “*It is important because it will help me in the future; I learn from my mistakes, and I do not repeat them.*” Participant 3 shared a similar perspective, stating, “*It is very important so that I can avoid making mistakes again.*” Participant 27 suggested not linking teachers' WCF with the grade: “*Correction without losing marks helps the student develop their skill.*”

Interestingly, several participants mentioned the role of feedback in developing their critical thinking, self-assessment skills, and memory. Participant 45 said, “*When I receive detailed feedback, it helps me think more critically about my writing and learn to evaluate my own work.*”

Participant 29 stated, “*The feedback process teaches me how to analyze and improve my writing, which is a skill I can use beyond just this class.*” All participants agreed that teachers' WCF immensely helped them remember their errors and avoid them in the future.

While most participants recognized the crucial role of teacher feedback in their learning and improvement, some expressed differing perspectives. Participant 13 highlighted, “*Feedback is helpful only if it does not affect their grade negatively.*” Another participant emphasized that the significance of feedback depended on the teacher's attitude and skill. They said, “*My preference depends on the teacher because some provide very helpful and actionable feedback while others' feedback isn't helpful*” (Participant 44).

Theme 2: Critical importance of comprehensive feedback.

One of the most prominent themes from the interview data was the importance of comprehensive feedback. The vast majority of participants (43 of 49) strongly preferred detailed and thorough feedback that addressed all aspects of their writing. This theme emerged in response to various questions in the interviews. Learners believed that comprehensive feedback is crucial for learning and improvement. When asked if the comprehensive feedback may be discouraging, 40 participants replied “no” or “definitely no.” Participant 2 elaborated, “*It pushes me to make better and stronger attempts to improve.*” Participant 15 stated, “*It is the only way I can learn.*”

Participant 12 stated regarding extended feedback received from their teachers, “*It is very important for me to avoid repeating my mistakes.*” This sentiment was echoed by Participant 15, who emphasized, “*Comprehensive feedback is important to me so that I can learn from my mistakes and then achieve the required grade.*”

Furthermore, participants highlighted the role of comprehensive feedback in helping them understand their writing strengths and weaknesses. Participant 20 noted, “*It is very important to know the location of every error and try to avoid them next time.*” When asked if they prefer a brief comment on errors, 43 participants replied “no.” Participant 21 stated, “*I want correction and comment on every single error in my writing.*”

The desire for comprehensive feedback was not limited to error correction but extended to encouragement and positive reinforcement. Participant 33 explained, “*I prefer that the teacher point out my strengths and weaknesses. It helps me understand what I'm doing right and where to improve.*” Participants 37 and 42 stated that comprehensive feedback is most helpful “*if not accompanied by losing marks.*” Participant 35 stated, “*I suffer from brief comments. I keep submitting my assignment and receiving the same critical comment that I really don't know how to correct. I need to know where my error is and what is needed to overcome it. So, no. I do NOT prefer brief feedback.*”

A few participants disagreed that comprehensive feedback is helpful. One learner mentioned that “*excessive feedback may mean losing more marks*” (Participant 40). Several other participants echoed this concern, expressing worries about their overall grade. Participant 18 noted that “*too much correction could be discouraging, but I can overcome that.*”

Theme 3: Nuanced preferences for feedback on various aspects of writing.

The interview data revealed a strong preference among the participants for feedback that addressed various aspects of their writing, including content, organization, grammar, and overall quality. However, their preferences were nuanced, with different participants placing varying levels of importance on different aspects of writing.

Most participants (38 out of 49) believed that receiving feedback on multiple dimensions of their writing was essential for their holistic development as writers. Participant 25 stated, “*I prefer that the teacher focuses on errors in both content and ideas, not just correct language errors or*

writing style errors.” This comprehensive approach was valued by many. Participant 41 explained, *“I want feedback on everything—grammar, vocabulary, structure, ideas. It all matters in good writing.”*

However, some differences were observed in opinion regarding the relative importance of the different aspects. Some participants placed higher values on content and ideas than on other aspects. Participant 36 emphasized, *“I believe the most valuable feedback is on the strength and logic of my arguments. Language can be polished later.”* Participant 2 disagreed: *“Correcting language and style errors is important, but content and ideas are something personal and crucial.”*

However, a significant number of participants stressed the importance of feedback on grammar and language. Participant 4 noted, *“I prefer that the teacher focus on grammatical errors. I can work on content myself, but I need help with language accuracy.”* Participant 19 stated, *“I prefer the teacher to correct all mistakes, but give language and spelling mistakes the highest priority.”*

Interestingly, several participants mentioned the importance of feedback on academic writing conventions and styles. Participant 47 explained, *“I want feedback on whether I’m using the right academic tone and following the proper citation styles. These are things I find hard to judge on my own.”*

It is evident that participants were divided on this point. Some prioritized feedback on content and ideas, believing that language can be refined later. They considered the strength and logic of their arguments as the most valuable feedback. Others believed that correcting language and style errors was more important. This group felt they could work on content themselves but needed help with language accuracy, as they considered content to be more personal.

These varied responses highlight the complex nature of learner preferences regarding the feedback focus. While the responses indicated a general desire for comprehensive feedback, individual learners may prioritize different aspects based on their perceived needs and goals.

#### Theme 4: Significance of timely and frequent feedback.

Timeliness and feedback frequency emerged as important themes in the interview data. A large majority of participants (44 out of 49) expressed a strong preference for receiving feedback promptly and frequently throughout the writing process for multiple drafts.

Many participants believed that timely feedback enhanced its significance and developed their ability to incorporate it into their writing. Participant 1 stated, *“Yes, I read them carefully and focus, immediately upon receiving the correction.”* This immediate engagement with feedback was common among participants. Participant 31 noted, *“I prefer to get feedback as soon as possible after submitting my work. It’s fresh in my mind then, and I can understand the comments better.”*

Additionally, participants highlighted the benefits of receiving feedback at various stages of the writing process, particularly in early drafts. They believed that timely feedback allowed them to make the necessary revisions and improvements before submitting the final versions of their work. Participant 10 noted, *“Yes, I re-read the article, avoiding errors if I was given the opportunity to resubmit it in order to get a better score.”* Participant 16 expressed a similar view: *“When do you want your teacher to provide feedback on your grammatical errors when you are writing your composition? On the first draft to correct them before final submission.”*

The desire for frequent feedback was also evident. Many participants expressed a preference for multiple rounds of feedback on a single piece of writing. Participant 43 explained, *“I find it really helpful to get feedback on my outline, then on my first draft, and then on my final version. It helps me improve at each stage.”* Furthermore, 29 out of 49 participants believed that the efficacy of feedback was much lower if the teacher did not require editing and resubmission of a different draft.

Some participants mentioned the value of immediate in-person feedback. Participant 27 stated, *“Sometimes, I prefer to discuss the feedback with my teacher in person. It allows me to ask questions and get clarification right away.”*

While many participants appreciated multiple rounds of feedback,

some participants did not express a preference for multiple drafts and revisions. One participant mentioned that they did not want to rewrite a paper and resubmit it. This suggests that not all learners are receptive to multiple rounds of feedback, with some preferring a single, comprehensive evaluation.

#### Theme 5: Necessity for clear, specific, and actionable feedback.

The participants strongly emphasized the importance of clear, specific, and actionable feedback in facilitating their understanding and application of the provided suggestions and corrections. Most participants (46 out of 49) valued feedback that was precise, targeted, and easy to comprehend and act upon.

Many participants expressed frustration with vague or general feedback. Participant 23 stated, *“The most important thing is to identify the error and try to avoid it, and not just put an underline or a circle around the error without specifying its type.”* This sentiment was echoed by Participant 42, who said, *“I don’t find it helpful when the teacher just writes ‘awkward’ or ‘unclear’ without explaining why or how to improve it.”*

Participants particularly appreciated the feedback, which provided clear guidance on how to improve. Participant 29 noted, *“I prefer that the teacher locates the error, explains it to me, and suggests how to correct it.”* Participant 48 elaborated, *“The most useful feedback gives me specific strategies or resources to help me improve, not just point out what’s wrong.”*

Several participants mentioned the value of examples in feedback. Participant 7 explained, *“It’s really helpful when the teacher provides examples of better ways to express an idea or structure a sentence. It gives me a model to learn from.”*

Interestingly, several participants expressed a preference for feedback that helped them understand the reasoning behind writing conventions. Participant 34 stated, *“I appreciate when the teacher explains not just what the correct form is, but why it’s correct. It helps me understand the logic of the language.”*

Although many participants wanted detailed, specific feedback, a few preferred general feedback. They expressed that they prefer the teacher to give a general comment on the paper. When asked for the reason, they replied that they were more interested in the overall impression their assignment made rather than the specifics of individual errors. Moreover, they desired a quick evaluation of their work, without having to spend too much time reading through extensive feedback.

#### Theme 6: Balanced approach to direct and indirect feedback methods.

The interview data revealed diverse opinions on the preferences of different feedback techniques, indicating that a combination of direct and indirect methods may be the most beneficial for learning. Participants mostly expressed preferences for direct feedback, in which the teacher provides explicit corrections and explanations, whereas some participants preferred indirect feedback, which prompts them to engage in self-correction and problem-solving.

A significant number of participants (32 of 49) expressed a clear preference for direct feedback. Participant 11 stated, *“I do not prefer indirect methods at all. It is important to know the error explicitly.”* Participant 39 explained, *“For complex grammatical errors, I prefer the teacher to provide the correct form. It helps me understand the rule better.”* Furthermore, 34 participants did not prefer that their teacher hinted at the error and left it for learners to locate and correct it. Participant 34 stated, *“This makes me confused.”* Similarly, 37 participants did not agree with the teacher simply underlining the error without commenting on the type of error. Participant 12 indicated, *“I need to know what type of error it is.”* Moreover, Participant 47 said, *“I need to know exactly where my error is and what type it is.”*

However, many participants (17 out of 49) valued indirect feedback methods. Participant 2 noted, *“Underlining the error and then directing you to a source for information is very useful. It encourages me to think and learn independently.”* Participant 24 stated, *“I like when the teacher indicates the type of error without correcting it. It challenges me to figure out the correct form myself.”* These learners prefer to independently search for the information. When participants were asked if they prefer chances for self-



correction, the majority (28 participants) replied “yes.” Ten participants preferred self-correction occasionally, but did not consider it beneficial as regular practice. Participant 15 responded, “Yes, *only if the teacher will subsequently assess my correction.*” Participant 13 indicated, “Yes, *if the teacher is available with me to comment on my correction.*” Participant 46 stated, “*I prefer a mix. Sometimes I need explicit correction, but other times I benefit more from figuring it out myself and I also remember it better.*” Moreover, some participants mentioned the value of explanatory feedback along with corrections. Participant 35 noted, “*I find it most helpful when the teacher not only corrects the error but also explains why it's wrong and how to avoid it in the future.*”

Theme 7: Impact of critical feedback on learners' motivation.

Interview data revealed that the participants valued teachers' WCF, even if the feedback was critical. A large majority of participants (41 out of 49) expressed a desire for feedback that focused on their areas of weakness, as long as it is delivered respectfully. They also appreciated feedback that recognizes their strengths and progress.

Participant 3 commented on critical feedback, stating, “Yes, *I want it. It is the only way to learn, and if it is done professionally, yes. If it is negative criticism not presented properly, it is frustrating, so no.*” Participant 36 argued, “*Negative criticism won't prevent me from learning.*” This sentiment was echoed by Participant 18: “*Feedback that only focuses on errors might be somehow discouraging. I appreciate when the teacher also points out what I've done well.*”

Several participants mentioned the importance of balanced feedback that addresses both strengths and weaknesses. Participant 32 explained, “*I prefer feedback that starts with what I've done well, then moves on to areas for improvement. It helps me feel more confident about tackling the weaknesses.*”

Interestingly, some participants noted that the tone of feedback was as important as its content. Participant 21 stated, “*Even when pointing out errors, if the teacher uses an encouraging tone, it makes me feel more positive about the revision process.*” Participant 11 elaborated, “*When correcting language errors, I hope that the criticism is delivered in an academic manner for the benefit of the learners. Some teachers point out errors loudly in front of the class, which is very embarrassing.*”

Nevertheless, a number of participants highlighted the point that critical feedback is welcome “*in case it does not affect our marks*” (Participant 29) and “*without losing grades*” (Participant 13). Additionally, Participant 29 highlighted the need to respect their privacy, indicating that they welcomed feedback, “*but not in front of my classmates.*”

Theme 8: Various preferences regarding delivery and presentation of teachers' WCF.

Participants' responses to questions about the mode of delivery and methods of presenting teachers' WCF varied. A total of 24 participants preferred handwritten feedback because “*it is more personal*” (Participant 7). Moreover, some learners commented that it was easier to remember if it was handwritten (Participant 12). Seven participants preferred electronic feedback because it was “*easy to read*” (Participant 46). Moreover, 18 participants exhibited no preference for either mode, with several commenting “*whatever is easier for the professor*” (Participants 29, 2, 1). With regard to color, 34 participants approved the use of red or “*any different color from those in the paper*” (Participant 29). Participant 8 indicated that “*red is very negative and discouraging.*” Participant 27 stated, “*Red is terrifying to me.*” Likewise, Participant 26 commented, “*Red is discouraging if over-used in the paper. Orange or purple are less harsh and more motivating.*”

## 5. Discussion

This study examined Saudi adult EFL learners' preferences for and perceptions of teachers' WCF. The following discussion integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings and addresses the results according to the research questions.

Specifically, this study intends to answer the question: “What are EFL learners' perceptions of teachers' WCF across multiple aspects?” The first

aspect investigated in this study is the relative importance and significance of teachers' WCF based on EFL learners' perceptions. The results revealed that EFL learners perceived teachers' WCF as vital to their language development, even when the feedback was critical, as long as it was informative. The majority of participants rated WCF as “very important” or “important” for improving writing skills, echoing Fitriyah et al.'s (2024), Rasool et al.'s (2023), and Yang et al.'s (2021) findings that learners value teachers' feedback as a core component of their learning. The qualitative findings provide deeper insights into the reasons for this high regard for teacher feedback, with participants stating that feedback is crucial for identifying their strengths and weaknesses, guiding their learning processes, and facilitating their growth as writers. This perception aligns with those reported by Fitriyah et al. (2024), who found that students consistently viewed teacher feedback as more valuable than peer feedback or self-evaluation in the context of EFL writing. Even when given the chance for self-evaluation, participants in the present study preferred to receive teachers' WCF afterward. The importance and explicit need for teachers' WCF is in line with earlier research findings, including those of Alsahil et al. (2024), Kessler and Casal (2024), Leow (2023), and Lee (2008). The present study provides counter-evidence to Yu et al.'s (2021) findings, which highlighted the negative side of feedback in second-language writing and its potential demotivation effect. Most of the learners in the present study consider the feedback to be motivating and expressed their absolute need to receive it. Nevertheless, a few learners reported receiving teachers' WCF with some concern if it affects their total grade. One learner linked feedback's relative importance to the teacher's skill in presenting and delivering it.

Regarding the second aspect of teachers' WCF, the quantitative and qualitative results clearly indicate that less is not more according to learners' preferences. One of the key findings of this study is learners' definite preference for comprehensive and detailed feedback that addresses all aspects of their writing, including language, content, organization, and overall quality. Participants expressed an ultimate need for comprehensive, unfocused, and detailed feedback. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of providing feedback that extends beyond surface-level corrections and addresses higher-order concerns in writing (Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, & Alsahil, 2024b; Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; McLellan, 2021; Rasool et al., 2023; Rasool et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2021). The quantitative results demonstrate that EFL learners in the Saudi context place a high value on comprehensive feedback, with the vast majority of participants considering comments on the overall quality of writing, content, organization, and grammar to be very important. The qualitative findings provided profound insights into the reasons for this preference, with participants expressing that comprehensive feedback is crucial to their holistic development as writers. This homogeneity of preferences in this regard can be related to learners' proficiency level and cultural background, as previous literature suggests these factors influence learners' preferences (Zhang et al., 2021).

The above finding of this study refutes Lee's (2019) suggestion that “less is more” and the claims of other studies within the same camp, including those of Lee et al. (2021), Leow (2023), Saragih et al. (2021), and Suerni et al. (2020). A possible interpretation of such variation of the results is due to learners' level of proficiency. Lee (2017) contends that learners with lower proficiency prefer and benefit from focused feedback. However, participants in the present study, having progressed beyond the early stages of language learning, appear eager to receive a broad range of error corrections. Additionally, as Cheng et al. (2021) noticed, cultural factors affect teachers' WCF practices, and appear to affect EFL learners' preferences as well. In Saudi Arabia, EFL learning is mostly taught traditionally with an emphasis on the accuracy of the written product. Accordingly, EFL learners prefer to correct *all* their errors to learn more and get better grades. It is worth noting that while the majority of participants prefer comprehensive feedback, a few expressed that it could be discouraging. However, they mentioned that they are able to manage and learn from it.

Furthermore, the study revealed that EFL learners prefer a combination of direct and indirect feedback methods, with a clear preference for techniques that provide direct guidance and precise explanations, allowing some opportunities for self-correction. The quantitative results indicated that participants strongly preferred feedback techniques that provided clear corrections and explanations, such as underlining the error and directing the learner to a source of information or correcting the error and providing an explanation for the correction. The qualitative findings provided further support for this preference, with participants expressing the value of clear and specific feedback that facilitates their understanding and application of the suggestions and corrections. A substantial number of participants did not object to indirect feedback and considered it a chance for self-learning and improvement echoing Lee's (2017) observation that indirect feedback encourages learner autonomy and critical thinking by guiding students to self-correct. Variations in participants' preferences for direct and indirect feedback are consistent with those of many earlier studies demonstrating that EFL learners favor both direct and indirect WCF, with a higher preference for direct correction (e.g., Abdel Latif et al., 2024b, b; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Chen et al., 2016; Elwood & Bode, 2014; Lee, 2017; Saragih et al., 2021; Suerni et al., 2020). The findings of this study are in line with research that has highlighted the benefits of employing various feedback techniques to cater to learners' diverse needs and preferences (Nassaji & Swain, 2000). The results suggest that teachers should consider implementing a balanced approach combining direct and indirect feedback with peer feedback opportunities to effectively support learners' writing development.

Another notable finding of this study was the preference for feedback on multiple drafts. Feedback on the first draft was extremely important to the participants of this study, particularly regarding content and organization. The quantitative results illustrated that many participants preferred to receive feedback on the content and organization of the first draft, and some preferred feedback on all drafts. The qualitative findings provide deeper insights into the reasons behind this preference, with participants expressing that early feedback on content and organization helped them develop their ideas, structure their arguments, and edit their written productions before the final submission. This result aligns with the findings of Geçkin's (2020), who emphasized the value of providing feedback on multiple drafts, as it allows students to incorporate feedback into their subsequent revisions and improve the quality of their writing. This is consistent with the findings of Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b), Fitriyah et al. (2024), and Lee (2008) who found that EFL learners who initially struggled to comprehend teachers' WCF on their first draft benefitted from feedback on subsequent drafts, highlighting the effectiveness of iterative feedback across multiple drafts. This indicates that EFL learners in the university context recognize the importance of early interventions in the writing process and value feedback that guides them in developing their ideas and effectively structuring their arguments. This aligns with earlier research which noted that students benefit from feedback at all stages of the writing process (Mao et al., 2024).

Moreover, this study highlighted the significance of various feedback foci, including language, content organization, and overall quality. Language and grammar feedback for EFL learners (which was deemed unimportant by Lee (2019)) is highly valued by EFL learners, as evidenced by the high percentage of respondents who considered comments on grammar to be very important or important. Additionally, this aligns with the results of Cheng et al. (2021). Furthermore, this finding is consistent with Bitchener and Knoch (2009), who noted that EFL learners often place high value on grammatical accuracy and appreciate feedback that helps them identify and correct language errors. The qualitative data provided further support for this finding, with the participants expressing the importance of grammatical feedback for their writing development. Nevertheless, such a result contradicts the findings of Mao and Crosthwaite (2019) and Yang et al. (2021), who argued that students desire feedback on global issues (content and

organization) while teachers prioritize local errors in language. An explanation of these variations can be linked to contextual and cultural factors. This focus aligns with traditional language instruction that prioritizes accuracy, as highlighted by Cheng et al. (2021). It appears that the EFL learners in the Saudi context share similar preferences to Chinese learners, valuing both language-focused and content-focused feedback.

In addition to language errors, the qualitative data in this study revealed that most participants wanted to receive feedback on multiple, or *all*, dimensions of their writing, including content, organization, and overall quality. Moreover, this study highlighted the significance of various feedback foci, including language, content organization, and overall quality. The request for comprehensive feedback is not only related to the amount of error correction but also to feedback foci. Such a finding echoes those of Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b). Collectively, these results underscore the need for teachers to strike a balance between providing feedback on language and content issues and tailoring their approach to the specific needs and preferences of their students.

Similar to the findings of Abdel Latif, Alsuhaibani, and Alsahil (2024b), participants in this study appreciated both handwritten and electronic modes of delivering feedback. Whereas handwritten feedback was described as more personal, electronic feedback was praised for being easy to read. Most participants had no preference for the color of the correction, while a few did not prefer red.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated EFL learners' preferences and perceptions regarding WCF in a university context, focusing on six key aspects: the importance of teachers' feedback, preferred degree of comprehensiveness of feedback, different types of feedback, foci of feedback, preferred timing of feedback, and preferred methods of presenting feedback. The findings of this study have significant implications for teaching practices and curriculum development in EFL writing classrooms at the university level. This study emphasizes that "less is NOT more" for EFL learners. The results suggest that teachers should adopt a comprehensive approach to WCF, address various aspects of writing, and provide feedback that covers as many issues as possible. This approach can help learners holistically develop their writing skills and meet academic writing demands in higher education settings.

## 7. Pedagogical implications

One of the key implications for teaching practice is the importance of providing comprehensive feedback that addresses language, content, organization, and overall quality. Teachers should strive to strike a balance between focusing on grammatical accuracy and higher-order concerns in writing by tailoring their feedback to the specific needs and preferences of their students. This can be achieved by employing a variety of feedback techniques such as direct, indirect, and explanatory comments. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of implementing a multi-draft approach to writing instruction that allows for feedback and revision at various stages of the writing process. Another implication for teaching practice is the need to provide clear, specific, and explanatory feedback that facilitates learners' understanding and application of suggestions and corrections. Teachers should offer feedback that identifies errors, provide guidance on how to correct them, and direct learners to relevant resources for further information.

A key recommendation from this study is to balance the desire for comprehensive WCF with practical considerations for teachers. While this study emphasizes that "less is NOT more" for EFL learners, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges EFL teachers face in providing comprehensive feedback on multiple drafts, given their workload and number of students. Therefore, it is recommended that educators explore alternative and complementary feedback methods such as AI-

assisted feedback tools aided with teachers' supervision and carefully implemented peer review under the teacher's guidance and monitoring. Regardless of the specific methods employed, learners' preferences need to be taken into consideration. Future research could explore effective ways to incorporate multiple methods of feedback under teachers' supervision to reduce their workload while at the same time providing EFL learners with comprehensive, detailed feedback.

However, it is important to note that simply adhering to students' preferences without considering other factors can be counterproductive (Leow, 2023; Mao et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers should view learners' preferences as one factor among many that contribute to effective WCF, alongside pedagogical principles, contextual factors, and individual learning goals (Lee et al., 2021; Leow, 2023; Mao et al., 2024). Ultimately, a balanced approach is needed to deliver feedback that resonates with learners while also aligning with best practices and promoting long-term language development (Fitriyah et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2024).

## 8. Limitations of the study and future recommendation

Although this study provides valuable insights into EFL learners' preferences and perceptions regarding teachers' WCF in the university context, it has several limitations. The results of this study are confined to a homogenous sample of Saudi university EFL students selected via convenience sampling. Future research could expand the sample size

and include participants from diverse university settings, language proficiency levels, and cultural backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, exploring the relationship between EFL learners' preferences and their writing performance by manipulating variables, such as the comprehensiveness or directness of feedback, offers a valuable avenue for future research. While this study focused on EFL learners' preferences, the actual effectiveness of comprehensive feedback in improving their performance warrants further investigation.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Manar Almanea:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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## Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

## Appendix A. EFL Learners' Perceptions and Preferences of Written Corrective Feedback: A Case Study of the University Context

Dear students,

The purpose of this study is to investigate and understand the perceptions and preferences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding teachers' written corrective feedback (WCF) in the context of the university setting. You are asked to fill in a questionnaire about your preferences and perception of teachers' WCF.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. All your information will be kept private and confidential. It will not be used or distributed for use in future research.

Please choose below whether you are willing to complete the online questionnaire for this study:

- ☐ I am willing to complete the questionnaire.
- ☐ No, I do not want to complete the questionnaire.

Demographics Section:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

STEP score \_\_\_\_\_.

Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Section Two:

A. Perceived importance of feedback.

1. How would you rate the importance of your teachers' feedback regarding your written production in English?

- ☐ Very important
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Not important
- ☐ Not important at all

2. How carefully do you review the error correction provided by your teacher?

- ☐ I do not read them.
- ☐ I read them but do not correct the errors.
- ☐ I read them and correct the major errors.
- ☐ I read them carefully and correct all the errors.

B. Degree of comprehensiveness of WCF

3. How would you rate your teachers' extended comments on your English writing?

- ☐ Very important
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Not important
- ☐ Not important at all

4. In your opinion
- o My teacher should correct all errors.
  - o My teacher should correct major errors but not minor ones.
  - o My teacher should only correct errors that interfere with communicating ideas.
  - o My teacher should not correct grammatical errors and should focus on content only.
- C. Focus of feedback
5. How would you rate the importance of the following types of comments by your teacher on your English writing?

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant
a. Comments on content				
b. Comments on grammar				
c. Comments on organization				
d. Comments on overall writing quality				

6. Which of the following types of errors would you like your teacher to correct and provide feedback on? (select all that apply)
- ☐ Grammatical errors.
  - ☐ Vocabulary errors.
  - ☐ Spelling errors.
  - ☐ Organization errors.
  - ☐ Punctuation errors.
- D. Timing of feedback
7. When do you prefer your teacher provide you feedback on language errors in your writing?
- o On the first draft
  - o On the second draft
  - o On all drafts
  - o On the final draft
8. When do you prefer your teacher provide you feedback on content in your writing?
- o On the first draft.
  - o On the second draft.
  - o On all drafts.
  - o On the final draft.
9. Your preferences regarding the method of presenting and delivering WCF

	Very Useful	Useful	Useless	Very Useless
a. Underlining the error without correcting it				
b. Underlining the error and directing you to a source for information				
c. Indicating the type of error without locating or correcting it				
d. Locating the error (e.g., by underlining it) and indicating the type of error				
e. Correcting the error and providing an explanation for the correction				
f. Asking my classmate(s) to correct the error				

## Appendix B. Interview questions

### 1. Perceived importance of feedback

1. To what extent do you think that it is important to receive teachers' feedback and error-correction on you English writing and other written assignments?
2. Do you prefer to receive a grade without precise feedback on your writing?
3. In your opinion, is the grade more important than feedback? Why?
4. Do you prefer to receive feedback on your writing even if it is critical and negative?
5. Do you think that teachers' comments and corrections are constructive and helpful in developing your writing?

### 2. Learners' response to feedback

6. Do you carefully read your teachers' feedback? If so, when? (e.g., right after you receive the feedback, before submitting another written assignment, before the final exam)
7. If given the chance of resubmission, do you rewrite your assignment, avoiding errors identified by your teacher?
8. Do you think that the effectiveness of teachers' feedback is lower if the teacher does not request resubmission?
9. Do you generally remember your errors more if your teacher corrects them? Do you subsequently avoid them more effectively?

### 3. Preferred degree of comprehensiveness

10. Do you prefer your teacher to correct and highlight *all* of your errors, whether they are in language, content, or writing style?
  11. Do you prefer your teacher to comment briefly on your writing?
  12. Do you prefer your teacher to correct your errors and include a final comment?
  13. Do you think that correcting all errors and providing feedback on them may discourage you and impede your efforts to progress?
4. Focus of feedback
14. Do you prefer your teacher to focus on errors in content without correcting language errors and errors in style?
5. Type of feedback (direct vs. indirect)
15. Do you prefer your teacher to identify the error by underlining or drawing a circle around it without providing a comment, giving you a chance to discover the type of the error yourself?
  16. Do you prefer your teacher to hint at the errors in comments without specifying the location of errors, allowing you the chance to find them yourself?
  17. Do you prefer your teacher to clearly mark the place of the error, specify its type, and correct it?
  18. Do you prefer your teacher to allow you the chance for self-correction?
6. Method of presentation
19. Do you prefer a specific color for teachers' feedback? Are you annoyed by the red color?
  20. Do you prefer handwritten or electronic mode of feedback?
  21. Would you like to include anything about your experience with teachers' WCF?

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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