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Student and Teacher Preferences in Written Corrective Feedback

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For the most part, teachers and students agree that WCF is an important part of language learning (Corpuz, 2011); however, there is disagreement about the type of feedback that best facilitates students' development. This disagreement extends both to the typology of WCF (i.e., direct, indirect, metalinguistic) and to the question of whether feedback should be comprehensive or focus on specific error types (Ellis, 2009). Many studies (e.g., Biber, Nekrasova, & Horn, 2011; Kang & Han, 2015) have investigated the effectiveness of WCF in improving writing; however, few researchers have studied teachers' and students' perceptions of the usefulness of feedback on specific categories of error. These perceptions impact instruction, particularly when they are not aligned. Students may believe that their teachers have failed to address the most crucial errors in their writing. Conversely. teachers may believe that students have disregard important feedback.

This report describes an investigation of preferences in WCF, examining the importance that teachers and students ascribe to five categories of feedback: content, grammar, organization, spelling, and vocabulary. These categories encompass the major areas of WCF. Based on a review of the literature and the state of language education in Thailand, we hypothesized that teachers' and students' preferences regarding WCF in the five areas studied would differ.

Literature Review

Today's L2 learners must acquire the skills to communicate effectively in English through a variety of rhetorical modes in order to succeed. Teachers have a role in helping students with this burden, but how best to accomplish this is not as clear. While students and teachers generally agree that the writing process must include some kind of correction on content and form, the balance of responsibility between the teacher and student—as well as how the feedback should be given—is still a question in need of research (Corpuz, 2011).

WCF refers to feedback on writing which is itself written, i.e., not exclusively oral feedback. Ellis's (2009) typology of WCF includes direct feedback (errors are corrected), indirect feedback (the presence of an error is identified but not corrected), and metalinguistic comment (errors are identified without correction and a general comment on the nature of the errors is given). In addition to these three main methods, Ellis (2009) also categorized feedback as either focused (correcting one or more specific types of errors) or

unfocused/comprehensive (correcting all errors). It should be noted that focused/unfocused feedback is not an additional exclusive method of WCF but an application method for the main typologies.

Two recent meta-analyses, Biber et al. (2011) and Kang and Han (2015), on WCF found that it has a "moderate to large effect on the grammatical accuracy of L2 students' writing" (Kang & Han, 2015, p. 36). Numerous studies have shown that selective feedback has a greater effect than comprehensive feedback for certain uses (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ebadi, 2014; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2002; Sheen, 2007). The advantage was seen when targeting specific grammar points, such as definite and indefinite articles. Selective feedback may also be advantageous for stimulating long-term learning skills, according to Lee (2003), Ellis et al. (2008) and Bitchener et al. (2005). Overall, meta-analysis suggests that it is more helpful to use selective feedback than comprehensive feedback (Anderson, 2011). Despite it being theoretically preferable for writing teachers to use focused feedback, research shows that many teachers' actual practice is to give feedback comprehensively for pragmatic reasons of policy and grading (Lee, 2009).

To reiterate, this report focuses on student and teacher perceptions and preferences regarding focused feedback in five areas: organization, content, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. These areas are categorized into form (grammar, vocabulary, and spelling) or content (content and organization). Biber et al. (2011) found that WCF correlated with significant gains in accuracy, as well as that a focus on content and form yielded better writing development than only focusing on form, especially for L2 learners. Content-related feedback is important in developing L2 learners' writing, but it is likely that there may also be a clash between teachers' focus on content versus students' expectations for a focus on grammar.

In 1996, the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) began reforms to change from a teacher-centered "pedagogy of the worksheet" (Pennington, 1999, p. 2) to a learner-centered one. Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison (2009) traveled to ten government-run schools in Thailand to observe classrooms and interview their teachers regarding the status of the decade-old reform. The observers saw no success in transforming the teachers' pedagogies, observing no communicative teaching approaches in the classrooms, and finding teachers confused about the nature of the reforms and lacking in training to execute them. There was a clear disconnect between the administration's decisions and their actual implementation. One interviewee insisted her students wanted a grammar-centered approach, so she had to oblige them by focusing on teacher-centered grammar instruction. Another teacher felt the teachers had "no model, no help" (Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009, p. 4). The surveyed teachers felt ill-equipped to create learner-centered lessons, citing lack of training, time, and financial resources. The study focused on a limited sample of schools and collected qualitative data; however, the results still strongly hinted at a disconnect between the MOE's official policy and the day to day teaching practice found in Thai schools.

Hallinger and Lee (2011) shed some more light on why these reforms were progressing more slowly than expected. Hallinger and Lee assessed Thai schools with a broader and more structured approach, surveying over 1,800 Thai school principals. Their results showed roughly a 30% teacher-adoption rate. Hallinger and Lee identified several key areas of impediment for the reforms: financial support, experience with change, staff training, and complexity of the reform. An additional element that may challenge the reform was also suggested: the top-down approach. A veteran school administrator said, "To bring about change, teachers must know that it is the supreme law of the land. Then as the administrator you must apply the pressure to them constantly" (Hallinger et al., 2000, p. 211). Hallinger noted this approach neglects intrinsically motivating the staff through educating them on the benefits of the reforms; once the external pressure was removed, the reforms faltered. The state of the Thai education system is expected to influence the preferences of the student participants in this study, as the majority of them graduated from Thai government schools.

Similar studies regarding error priority were conducted by Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) and Sayyar and Zamanian (2015). The responses were measured on the Likert-scale, where "1" was "least useful" and "5" was "most useful". Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) surveyed EFL learners in Vancouver, BC, and found that students and teachers had different views on the importance of organization (3.8 for students, 4.3 for teachers), content (3.1 for students, 4.0 for teachers), and vocabulary (4.5 for students, 3.9 for teachers). They agreed about grammar, however, with students and teachers rating it 4.6 and 4.5 respectively. Students

commented that "grammar, spelling, and vocabulary are more important than organization and ideas" (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010, p.113). Sayyar and Zamanian (2015) performed the same survey on Iranian EFL learners and found that students and teachers were in agreement regarding grammar (median of 5 for both students and teachers), spelling (median of 4 from both students and teachers), and organization (median of 4 from both students and teachers). Regarding content, the students scored it a median of 3 while teachers gave a median score of 4. The results of these two studies suggest that grammar is viewed as important by both students and teachers, but their views on the importance of content, organization, vocabulary, and spelling may vary.

Methodology

This study is an investigation of teachers' and students' preferences regarding WCF. As discussed in the literature review, many researchers (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2005; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2002) have argued that selective WCF (i.e., feedback that targets certain errors) has a greater effect on the development of students' writing than comprehensive WCF, and meta-analysis has suggested focused WCF is superior to comprehensive WCF (Anderson, 2011). This leads to the further question of what the focus of the feedback should be. Whereas other studies (e.g., Lee, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008) have investigated the effectiveness of focused feedback, this study centers on the perceptions of students and teachers regarding error types.

The five error types investigated in this paper are content, grammar, organization, spelling, and vocabulary. Three of the five—grammar, vocabulary, and spelling—can be categorized as form-focused, while the remaining two—content and organization—can be categorized as content-focused. Based on the literature, we hypothesized that teachers' and students' WCF preferences would differ significantly. The preferences of the teachers participating in the study are informed by current theory, which points toward the effectiveness of focus on content as well as focus on form (Biber et al., 2011). In contrast, the majority of students in the program have had long experience in teacher-centered, grammar-focused classrooms: "In the Thai tradition, teaching English means teaching grammar" (Foster, Fan, & Le, 2015, p. 265).

Data was collected through the use of two questionnaires. These were adapted from previous research by Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) and Sayyar and Zamanian (2015). Each questionnaire asked the respondent to rate the usefulness of the five target categories of feedback on a five-point Likert scale, one being "least useful" and five being "most useful". The questionnaire also included an open-ended question asking respondents to explain their selections. Earlier studies have used similar questionnaires (e.g., Ferris, 1995), and the validity of these instruments has been established. The teachers' and students' questionnaires are included in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively. The survey was administered as part of a larger study on WCF preferences and the justifications for these preferences. IRB approval was obtained before the study began.

The participants in this study were drawn from the teachers and students in an intensive English for academic purposes program at a Thai university. All of the students and teachers in the program were invited to participate. Of the 361 students enrolled at the center, 262 responded, yielding a response rate of approximately 73%. All of the 21 teachers in the program responded. The English proficiency of the students ranged from intermediate to upper-intermediate, and their ages ranged from 17-20. Just under half (approximately 43%) of the student respondents identified as male and the remainder as female. All teachers were native speakers of English, and the vast majority (approximately 90%) of the teacher respondents were male. Half of the teachers held a master's degree in TESOL, applied linguistics, or a related area, and nearly all of the teachers held a Cambridge CELTA or a similar TESOL certificate.

At the beginning of the term, the researchers distributed informed consent forms and explained the survey. Teachers and students were invited to complete and submit the informed consent form then to complete the survey via Google Forms.

Results

After collecting responses to each of the questionnaires via Google Forms, we calculated the mean scores in each of the five areas. The average of teachers' responses across all five categories was 4.39 and the average of students' responses across all categories was 4.21. The mean scores in each of the five categories of WCF are presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Mean Perceived Usefulness Scores on a Five-Point Likert Scale

Category of WCF	Mean of Teachers' Responses	Mean of Students' Responses
Content	4.55	4.15
Grammar	4.40	4.46
Organization	4.80	4.15
Vocabulary	4.25	4.33
Spelling	3.95	3.94

The results were clustered toward the top end of the five-point Likert scale, ranging from 3.95 to 4.8 for teachers and 3.94 to 4.46 for students. Teachers and students showed distinct preferences regarding the five categories of WCF. Teachers ranked the categories as follows from most to least useful: organization, content, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. In contrast, students ranked them grammar, vocabulary, organization, content, and spelling. Teachers valued organization and content over grammar and vocabulary, whereas students valued grammar and vocabulary over organization and content. Both groups ranked spelling feedback as least useful.

TABLE 2
Ranked Usefulness of Five Categories of WCF (Including Scores on a Five-Point Likert Scale)

Usefulness Rank	Teachers	Students
1 (Most Useful)	Organization (4.8)	Grammar (4.46)
2	Content (4.55)	Vocabulary (4.33)
3	Grammar (4.4)	Organization (*tie* — 4.15)
4	Vocabulary (4.25)	Content (*tie* — 4.15)
5 (Least Useful)	Spelling (3.95)	Spelling (3.94)

As hypothesized, teachers' and students' preferences regarding WCF differed. While the responses from both groups were clustered toward the upper end of the five-point Likert scale, there was a significant difference in the standard of deviation of the responses. Also, each group showed distinct preferences regarding the categories of feedback that they found most useful.

Discussion

Aspects of the students' responses are consistent with the literature review. In line with the results of Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) and Sayyar and Zamanian (2015), the student respondents perceived that grammar was the most useful category of feedback. On the students' survey, the item about grammar-focused WCF had both the highest mean. This finding is consistent with Ferris's (1999) observation that students rely on form feedback and with Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison's (2009) observation of the prevalence of teacher-centered, non-communicative approaches to education in the Thai school system. Academics still debate whether WCF should focus on content (Biber et al., 2011), focus on form (e.g., Ashwell, 2000), or even be given at all (Truscott, 1996). In contrast with the literature, the teachers who participated in the study showed a clear preference. The mean score across all five categories was 4.39, and they valued all categories of feedback highly. The teachers showed a preference for feedback that focuses on

organization (mean score of 4.80) and content (mean score of 4.55). The standard of deviation in their responses to these five-point Likert scale questions regarding the usefulness of organization and content were also quite low at 0.41 and 0.60 respectively.

Though debate about the effectiveness of various types of WCF continues, the teachers who participated in the study were in relative agreement. Comparing this present study with the two previous (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Sayyar & Zamanian, 2015), we find that the results of the surveyed students are similar in terms of placing higher importance on grammar and vocabulary. In contrast to the previous two studies, where grammar was ranked most important by teachers and students, the present study found that the surveyed teachers ranked content and organization highest. Across the three studies, the results were similar in terms of indicating (1) an agreement between teachers and students in the importance of grammar (via average score) and (2) a disagreement on the relative importance of content. Based on the differences between the results of our study and those of previous studies, further research in diverse contexts seems warranted.

Student and teacher preferences can impact effectiveness when students and teachers value specific categories of WCF differently. Selective feedback, which some studies (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris, 2002) have found to be more effective than comprehensive feedback, may be less effective when teachers' and students' WCF preferences differ. These differences of perceived value may lead to teachers' frustration when their students fail to engage with their feedback. Likewise, it may also lead to students' disappointment when teachers fail to provide the feedback that is most meaningful to them. While the preferences of the teachers and students who participated in this study differed, both groups of participants valued the five categories of WCF relatively highly. Language program administrators are advised to administer the surveys included in Appendix A and Appendix B to the teachers and students in their programs and compare the results. Similarly, language teachers would benefit from administering the survey in Appendix B to their students and comparing the results to their own beliefs.

While understanding students' and teachers' espoused preferences could aid in effective language instruction, these preferences should be interpreted with caution. A recent study found that teachers' beliefs about WCF and their actual pedagogy differ on key points (Lee, 2009). The teachers in the study claimed to value content and organization as important aspects of good writing; however, 91.4% of the 5,353 feedback points given by the 26 teachers focused on form (Lee, 2009). These results show that the type of WCF that teachers provide could be influenced by factors other than their preference, such as student expectations or institutional policy. Further research could enhance the value of our study on teachers' and students' preferences in WCF by investigating how these preferences impact the giving and receiving of feedback.

Conclusion

This study compared the WCF preferences of teachers and students at an intensive English program at a Thai university. It used a Likert-scale questionnaire to gauge the perceived usefulness of feedback in five areas: content, grammar, organization, spelling, and vocabulary. The hypothesis that the two groups would express different preferences was supported by the data. The teachers perceived organization and content to be more useful than grammar and vocabulary, while the students perceived grammar and vocabulary to be more useful than organization and content. WCF is central to many language courses around the world and is therefore an important research topic. This study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion of WCF by applying established questionnaires in a novel context, yielding results distinct from those of previous research. Further research on WCF in diverse global contexts will add nuance to the discussion of this topic. For this reason, we would encourage educators and researchers in diverse contexts to administer similar questionnaires and to add their voices to the conversation.

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Appendix A

Teacher's Questionnaire

We are conducting a survey on student and teacher's views of written corrective feedback for research and pedagogical purposes. We would greatly appreciate your assistance of completing this questionnaire.

Age: Gender: ▢male ▢female   Highest degree reached:
Years of teaching: Level of classes taught this term:

For each of the following questions circle one number that best describes its usefulness for an intermediate to advanced EFL student.
1= least useful 2= slightly useful 3= somewhat useful 4= very useful 5= most useful

    a) How useful is it to point out **organization errors** in an intermediate to advanced EFL student's written work? **1 2 3 4 5**

    b) How useful is it to point out **grammatical errors** in an intermediate to advanced EFL student's written work? **1 2 3 4 5**

    c) How useful is it to point out **content/idea errors** in an intermediate to advanced EFL student's written work? **1 2 3 4 5**

    d) How useful is it to point out **spelling errors** in an intermediate to advanced EFL student's written work? **1 2 3 4 5**

    e) How useful is it to point out **vocabulary errors** in an intermediate to advanced EFL student's written work? **1 2 3 4 5**

Please explain the reason(s) for your choice(s).

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_____

Appendix B

Student's Questionnaire

(5) If there are many different types errors in your written work, how useful is it for your teacher to point out that category of error? Circle one number that describes the usefulness to you of pointing out that error.
1= least useful 2= slightly useful 3= somewhat useful 4= very useful 5= most useful

    a) Organization errors. (Example: paragraph structure, sentence order)
    1 2 3 4 5

    b) Grammatical errors. (Example: word order, sentence structure)
    1 2 3 4 5

    c) Content/idea errors. (Example: comments on your ideas)
    1 2 3 4 5

    d) Teacher points out spelling errors. (Example: word is spelled wrong)
    1 2 3 4 5

    e) Teacher points out vocabulary errors. (Example: wrong word choice, wrong meaning)
    1 2 3 4 5

Please explain the reason(s) for your choice(s).

_____
_____