Same Goal, Varying Beliefs: How Students and Teachers See the Effectiveness of Feedback on Second Language Writing

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Abstract: There is no shortage of research on learner preferences and teacher perceptions of the value of feedback in L2 writing. However, studies comparing opinions from both sides are rare. Moreover, little is known whether L2 proficiency impacts learner preferences for feedback. To bridge these gaps, this study surveyed 70 students and 16 teachers from an intensive English program in the U.S. on their preferences concerning six dimensions of L2 writing feedback: source, mode, tone, focus, scope, and explicitness. The findings suggest that (1) students overall regarded teachers as the most credible source of feedback and wanted teachers to mark all errors in their writing and correct them directly; (2) higher proficiency students showed more positive attitudes towards peer feedback and inclination towards written, comprehensive, and indirect correction; (3) students at the two ends of proficiency (high and low) favored feedback in a mixed tone; (4) while teachers and students were allies on the usefulness of oral feedback, feedback on both rhetorical and language issues, and feedback in a balanced tone, teachers were nonetheless neutral about the benefits of peer feedback and preferred focused, indirect feedback. Suggestions are offered for ESL writing instructors to adapt their feedback for its maximum effects.

Keywords: feedback; L2 writing; student preferences; teacher perceptions; L2 proficiency level

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1. Introduction

Research on the effectiveness of feedback in L2 writing premises itself on two overarching objectives. One is to develop writers' metacognitive process of learning to use writing as a tool of self-expression and communicative purposes (Klein & Boscolo, 2016); the other, pertaining more to L2 learners, is to help them gain command of the knowledge and mechanics of writing in a second language that they are still learning. In either process, pedagogical intervention is necessary to rectify rhetorical misdirections of a writer's discourse and to correct decipherable lexical and syntactic errors.

Since the beginning of research into feedback in writing, L2 writing scholarship has focused heavily on corrective feedback (CF), that is, response to learner errors in language use (Riazi, Shi, & Haggerty, 2018). Surprisingly, despite numerous publications, little consensus has been reached on fundamental questions such as whether CF facilitates writing and language development in an L2 (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Recent research has argued that the efficacy of CF is not a function of a single way in which CF is practiced, instead it is determined collectively by a few interwoven factors, namely, internal attributes of feedback, learning context, learner attitudes and perceptions of specific CF techniques, and learners' level of L2 proficiency (e.g., Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Rummel, 2014).

A substantial number of studies have surveyed learners on their preferences for how and how often they should receive CF, what types of errors in their writing should be corrected, how useful different feedback approaches are, and the extent to which they can effect positive changes in revision (e.g., Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Hong, 2006; Lee, 2005; Leki, 1991; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Ruegg, 2017; Zhu, 2010). A smaller number of studies have investigated teachers' views on how effective their efforts are in helping students develop rhetorical and linguistic competence in L2 writing (e.g., Diab, 2005; Ferris, 2014; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Ferris, Liu, & Rabie, 2011; Junqueira & Payant, 2015; Ko, 2011; Lee, 2008). A few studies involving both students and teachers have found the two sides align on some approaches while diverging on others (e.g., Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; McCargar, 1993; Schulz, 1996; Zacharias, 2007). Discrepancies between what students expect and what teachers provide could lead to frustrations and tensions on both sides, diminishing the intended heuristic effects of feedback (Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Rafiei & Salehi, 2016).

In addition, a few studies have suggested that general L2 proficiency plays a crucial role in learner preferences and resulting gains from feedback. For instance, Nemati, Alavi, Mohebbi, & Masjedlou (2017) report that in comparison to their intermediate and advanced counterparts, elementary level Iranian EFL learners showed a stronger preference for focused error feedback and were more interested in revision. Counterintuitively, Li and He's (2017) research indicates that lower proficiency Chinese EFL learners are inclined towards indirect, metalinguistic feedback rather than direct

corrections. Although illuminating, these results are far from being conclusive due to a general scarcity in this line of research.

Clearly, further investigation is needed to examine the relationship between learner perceptions about what 'works' for them and teacher beliefs regarding what 'works' for learners, the extent of alignment and divergence between the views of the two sides, and the pedagogical implications that can be derived from an understanding of these nuanced relationships. The role of learners' general L2 proficiency in their preferences for feedback also warrants further inquiry. Utilizing a six-dimension analytical framework for investigating feedback in L2 writing, this study scrutinizes the alignment (or the lack thereof) between university ESL student preferences and instructor perceptions and how L2 proficiency impacts learner views on the usefulness of various feedback strategies. The findings contribute fresh insights to the ongoing debate on the value of feedback in L2 writing development.

2. Research Background

2.1 An analytical theoretical framework of feedback in L2 writing

The analytical framework used in this study originated from Russell and Spada's (2006) meta-analysis on the effectiveness of CF in L2 grammar learning. The authors examined CF from four dimensions: 'source', 'mode', 'focus', and 'type' (i.e., explicitness). A fifth dimension, the 'tone' of feedback, was added in Biber, Nekrasova, and Horn's (2011) meta-analysis of the effects of feedback on L1-English and L2-writing development. In their research, feedback is broadly defined as "constructive evaluation of writing quality to the student" (p. 7). According to this definition, feedback on L2 writing comprises comments on global issues (content, organization, audience, and style, etc.) and corrective feedback (CF) which targets specifically on errors in language use. Informed by two recent L2 meta-analyses (Kang & Han, 2015; Liu & Brown, 2015), a sixth dimension, 'scope', was added in the current study, creating a comprehensive six-dimension analytical framework for scrutinizing feedback in L2 writing (see Figure 1).

'Source' refers to the provider of feedback, which can be teachers, tutors, peers, or computer programs (e.g., *Grammarly*®). 'Mode' concerns the means of delivery. Traditionally, feedback is given as written comments on students' papers. It is now a common practice to provide feedback electronically via word processors (e.g., MS Word and Google Docs). Feedback can be conveyed orally through face-to-face conferencing or audio- and audiovisual recordings utilizing voice recorders or screen casting tools (e.g., *Jing*®). Feedback also varies in its 'tone': positive feedback acknowledges strengths whereas negative feedback identifies weaknesses. Moreover, feedback can 'focus' on global rhetorical issues (content, structure, audience, and style, etc.) or local errors in language use (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) and mechanics (spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc.). Furthermore, CF differs in 'scope' according to the quantity and error types being targeted. It can address all errors in a text,

concentrate on major errors hindering comprehensibility, or target error types as identified by learning objectives. Lastly, CF varies on a spectrum of explicitness. The most explicit type is direct correction accompanied by metalinguistic explanation (e.g., using error codes), and the least explicit form can be error locating (via underlining, circling, or highlighting) or merely error tallying in marginal or endnotes. Mixed CF combining direct correction or error locating with metalinguistic explanations is also a viable option.

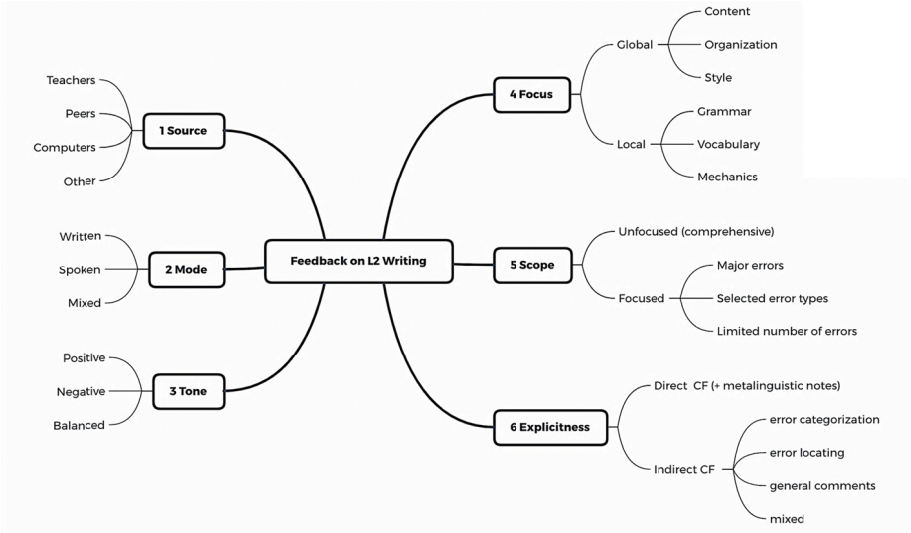

Figure 1. A six-dimension analytical framework of feedback in L2 writing.

This six-dimension analytical framework captures the varying extents of breadth and depth in the decisions made by writing teachers when providing feedback on errors and problems in student writing. The central question then becomes one of selecting and using an optimal strategy or a set of strategies in providing feedback to help students achieve the anticipated learning outcomes, an issue that has been investigated in L2 writing feedback research in the past few decades. One strand of scholarship specifically focuses on surveying students' preferred types of feedback and teachers' opinions of what they believe to be effective feedback practices. The sections below present a detailed review of this body of research following the order of 'source', 'mode', 'tone', 'focus', 'scope', and 'explicitness' as specified in the framework.

2.2 Past research on student and teacher perceptions of feedback in L2 writing

2.2.1. Source of feedback

Research on the source of feedback centers around learner attitudes towards peer review as a complement or alternative to teacher-generated feedback. Some report students' favorable attitudes toward peers as an additional source for global comments (Chang, 2016; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Ruegg, 2017) and proofreading (Reed & Burton, 1985). Others note students' concerns with peers' competencies in critiquing their language use (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), especially when the feedback was given by non-native speakers of a language (Chaudron, 1984; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994; Zacharias, 2007). For instance, the advanced EFL learners in Hong's (2006) research appeared particularly negative about peer review: some were "worried and frustrated because their essays were exposed to useless criticism" (p. 68) while others complained that peer comments focusing predominantly on surface level errors did not help them improve the overall writing quality. Teachers have also expressed skepticism about the value of peer review due to the perception that students generally lack rhetorical and linguistic competence in providing meaningful feedback (Ferris, 2014). Empirical studies comparing the efficacy of feedback from diverse sources have yielded mixed results. On the one hand, for example, Ruegg (2017) reports significantly larger gains in grammatical accuracy for students receiving feedback from teachers than from peers. On the other hand, Chaudron (1984) finds no difference among feedback given by teachers, native English-speaking, and non-English-speaking peers with respect to their effects on revision. Diab (2016) also fails to observe significant differences among the teacher, peer, and self-feedback groups in students' reduction of lexical and pronoun agreement errors. Lundstrom and Baker's (2009) research even suggests that reviewing peers' papers actually helped L2 students make more improvements in their own writing. In their meta-analysis, Biber, Nekrasova, & Horn (2011) conclude that, "the greatest gains for L2-English students are achieved in response to other feedback including feedback from other students" (p. 50).

2.2.2. Mode of feedback

Scant attention has been paid to L2 learner and instructor opinions of various delivery modes of feedback, that is, written, oral, or mixed (audio-visual). However, results from the few studies addressing this issue are mostly consistent. The majority of students preferred written feedback accompanied by oral elaborations in follow-up student-teacher conferences (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Rafiei & Salehi, 2016). The second popular choice was written feedback, leaving spoken only feedback the least desired option. Huang's (2000) study is an exception in that the EFL students viewed audio-recorded feedback (ARF) as more useful than written feedback. 'Thoroughness', 'clarity', and 'validity' were some benefits of ARF mentioned by the students (p. 228). In contrast to students' overwhelming preferences for written feedback coupled with oral

follow-ups, teachers believe that the effect of the mixed mode depends on the aspects of writing being addressed. Specifically, "complex sentence-level errors are often more easily handled in back-and-forth discussion than through one-way teacher corrections with which the student must grapple later" (Ferris, 2014, p.15). Moreover, oral feedback is more efficient in addressing rhetorical issues and meaning-related errors that are more efficiently solved through negotiations between students and teachers. The limited amount of evidence from experimental studies seems to support the superiority of a combination of written and oral feedback (e.g., Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005).

2.2.3. Tone of feedback

Research on the 'tone' of feedback seems to strike more consensus than divergence of opinion. In an early study, Cardelle and Corno (1981) find that most L2 students anticipate receiving praise along with constructive criticism. Students in Ferris's (1995) study claimed that it was the teacher's positive comments that they remembered best. On the other hand, a few studies report that L2 learners do expect negative feedback from teachers (Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2005; Leki, 1991; Liao, 2004). Some scholars caution that despite students' eagerness to know their errors, an excessively harsh tone does more harm than good as it may depress and hurt students' self-esteem (Reed & Burton, 1985). It could also lower students' willingness to complete a task or even demotivate them from performing a task at all to avoid the pain (Martin, Veldman, & Anderson, 1980). On the contrary, overly positive comments may sound insincere and condescending and thus fail to stimulate growth among learners. Barringer and Gholson (1979) assert that effective feedback should provide learners with a combination of 'what is done right' and 'what is done wrong'. In line with this view, Hyland and Hyland (2001) encourage L2 teachers to strive for a balance among the three functions of feedback: to praise, to criticize, and to suggest in order to establish a positive relationship with students to foster writing development.

2.2.4. Focus of feedback

L2 learners' opinions on which aspects of writing they wish to receive feedback are typically purpose- or context-driven. Some believe that teachers' feedback on grammar errors is most helpful (Saito, 1994). Others want teachers to comment on both language errors and rhetorical problems as they believe that the latter guides them in strategically revising the whole piece of writing (Radecki & Swales, 1988). Still others prefer teacher feedback on global issues to a mere focus on grammatical and mechanical errors (Enginarlar, 1993; Junqueira & Payant, 2015). Discrepancies between learner expectations and teacher practices have been noted in the literature. For instance, some teachers limited their feedback to language errors whereas students hoped to get more global comments to guide them in tackling structural and content problems (Lee, 2009; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Rafiei & Salehi, 2016). Other teachers concentrated solely on rhetorical issues while ignoring L2 students' unique needs for continuing support on

language development (Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011). The ESL teachers in Amrhein and Nassaji's (2010) research believed that it is important to focus "as much on the comprehensibility of the content as on form-focused correction" (p.115). Such balanced view finds support in Biber, Nekrasova, and Horn's (2011) meta-analysis which concludes that "a combined focus on content + form results in greater gains in writing development than an exclusive focus on form" (p. 50).

2.2.5. Scopes of CF

L2 learners generally prefer comprehensive feedback (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2005; Leki, 1991). However, correcting every single error in students' writing may leave them with the wrong impression that good writing equals error-free writing (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). Excessive error correction could also make students feel 'disappointed', 'discouraged', and 'helpless' (Zacharias, 2007, p. 45-46). It can be mentally and physically overwhelming and exhausting for teachers as well (Lee, 2005). L2 teachers' opinions vary greatly on what they believe to be the appropriate amount of CF. Some feel morally obliged to point out all errors (Ko, 2011; Rafiei & Salehi, 2016), whereas others believe in the practical benefits of the focused approach (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010). A few empirical studies find comprehensive and selective CF equally effective (e.g., Van Beunigen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2012), whereas more support the benefits of the focused approach (Kang & Han, 2015; Kao & Wible, 2011; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009).

2.2.6. Explicitness of CF

Overall, L2 learners dislike broad and vague comments. Most students expect teachers to correct their errors directly or at least provide concrete suggestions on how they can correct the errors on their own (Lee, 2005; Shin, 2008; Zacharias, 2007; Zhu, 2010). More autonomous students, nonetheless, responded favorably to indirect CF (Haupt & Bikowski, 2014; Leki, 1991; Reed & Burton, 1985). In contrast to students' overwhelming desire for direct correction, teachers are generally inclined toward indirect CF. Some L2 writing scholars maintain that the act of correcting one's own errors requires reflecting on the nature of the errors and coming up with viable solutions to repair them, which as a result promotes autonomous learning (e.g., Rafiei & Salehi, 2016; Westmacott, 2017). Ferris (2003) points out that the benefits of the indirect approach lie in "increased student engagement and attention to forms and problems" (p. 52). Teachers' beliefs align with empirical evidence, which has pointed to the learning effects of indirect CF in the form of error locating (e.g., Chandler, 2003), error coding (e.g., Westmacott, 2017), and metalinguistic notes (e.g., Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014). Noticing the mediating role played by error types, Ferris (1999, 2006) recommends providing indirect CF on rule-governed 'treatable' errors and direct CF on idiosyncratic errors which are otherwise 'untreatable'.

2.3 L2 proficiency and learner preferences for feedback in L2 writing

Past research has enriched our understanding of learner expectations and instructor beliefs about what constitutes effective L2 feedback practices. However, an issue of particular relevance to L2 writing pedagogy — whether learners at various proficiency levels differ in their preferences for feedback — has received little attention. The few existing studies have cast valuable initial light on the issue. Three studies, Enginarla (1993), Liao (2004), and Nemati et al. (2017) note that low proficiency L2 learners regard CF as important while their more proficient peers did not. Iwashita (2003) finds that less advanced L2 learners prefer explicit CF whereas more advanced learners hold more favorable attitudes toward implicit CF. Li and He's (2017) research, however, indicates that lower proficiency EFL learners were actually inclined towards indirect and metalinguistic feedback. Such controversies can be resolved through further research on the extent to which learners' L2 proficiency level influences their attitudes, beliefs, and preferences for feedback (Lee, 2005; Westmacott, 2017). Insight gained on this nuanced relationship could help L2 writing instructors cater their feedback practices to students' proficiency level so as to maximize the intended potency of CF and to promote learner agency and autonomy.

To address the aforementioned gaps in the existing literature, three interconnected research questions are posed in this study: (1) What are students' preferences for various types of feedback in L2 writing? (2) In what ways does L2 proficiency level influence students' preferences for feedback? (3) What are teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of various L2 writing feedback strategies?

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

3.1.1. Student participants

Table 1. The Six Proficiency Levels of Instruction in the ESL Program

Level	Proficiency Level	Score Band
1	Low-Beginner	0 – 15
2	High-Beginner	16 – 31
3	Low-intermediate	32 – 44
4	Intermediate	45 – 56
5	High-intermediate	57 – 69
6	Advanced	+ 70

Seventy students from a university ESL program in the southwestern U.S. participated in the study. For the purpose of instruction, the program assigns students into six proficiency levels based on their scores in an in-house placement test administered at

the beginning of each fall semester. The test is intended as an equivalence of the TOEFL iBT, targeting the same four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill is awarded 30 points, adding up to a total of 120 points. The six proficiency levels of instruction are presented in Table 1.

The two beginner levels (Levels 1 and 2) were excluded from the study, as students had not yet started practicing writing complete essays. Only the intermediate to advanced levels (Levels 3 to 6) were involved in the survey. Students at these four levels practice essay writing in two or three courses as required by the program curricular (see Table 2). Writing tasks in Reading and Writing, Content-based Instruction, and English Academic Writing familiarize students with common rhetorical patterns (e.g., cause and effect, comparison and contrast, problem-solution-evaluation) and critical academic writing skills (e.g., paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing). Students' essays are graded on project-specific, analytical rubrics comprising separate scales for organization, language use, and task completion, etc. Writing Lab provides instructional support to students in revising and polishing language use in their essays written in other ESL courses.

Table 2. ESL Courses with Writing Components

Level	Writing Courses	Hours Per Week	Total
3 & 4	Reading and Writing (RW)	6	
	Writing Lab (WLab)	2	14
	Content-based Instruction (CBI)	6	
5	Freshmen Composition[a]	4	6
	Writing Lab	2	
6	English Academic Writing (EAW)	6	
	Writing Lab	2	8

Note. [a]This is a three-credit hour regular university course that degree-seeking level 5 students were enrolled in.

Table 3 displays the demographic data of the participants. As can be seen, they were young adult ESL learners representing primarily male Arabic and Chinese L1 speakers. As is typical in many university ESL programs, there were more students in the two middle levels and fewer at the two ends of the proficiency continuum.

3.1.2. Teacher participants

Sixteen teachers from the ESL program responded to the survey. They represented diverse L1 backgrounds: American (n = 6), Korean (n = 5), Chinese (n = 1), Japanese (n = 1), Turkish (n = 1), Filipino (n = 1), and Uzbekistan (n = 1). Three were full-time lecturers (2 Americans and 1 Filipino) and the rest were graduate teaching assistants from the MA-TESOL and PhD Applied Linguistics programs. All of the teacher informants had experience in teaching English writing. The program embraces process-

oriented approaches to writing instruction and requires students to produce multiple drafts for all essay-writing tasks. Teachers are trained to direct their feedback towards content and organization in the initial drafts. Feedback on language errors is given on revised drafts. Peer review is regularly practiced in the courses involving writing assignments as specified in Table 2.

Table 3. Demographic *Information of Student Participants*

		Age		Gender		L1		
Level	*N*	*M*	*Range*	Male	Female	Arabic	Chinese	Other
3	8	22	19–26	6	2	8	0	0
4	24	21	18–24	23	1	21	3	0
5	32	23	18–48	28	4	26	3	3
6	6	24	19–27	5	1	2	2	2
Total	70	23	18–48	62	8	57	8	5

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1. Student Questionnaire

The Student Questionnaire (see Appendix A) was designed within the six-dimension analytical framework of L2 writing feedback discussed above. The five multiple-choice items in Part 1 elicit student respondents' preferences for feedback in ESL writing regarding its 'source', 'mode', 'tone', 'focus', and 'scope'. The seven sentences in Part 2 demand students to select their preferred type of CF in terms of the level of 'explicitness' within sentential context.

3.2.2. Teacher Questionnaire

The Teacher Questionnaire (see Appendix B) aimed to elicit teacher informants' beliefs regarding L2 writing feedback. Out of practical concern about teachers' heavy workload and to encourage participation, a parallel version of the Student Questionnaire was created to reduce the time needed to complete the survey. The Teacher Questionnaire consists of thirteen short statements. They target the same six dimensions of feedback in the framework: 'source', 'mode', 'tone', 'scope', and 'explicitness'. The teachers were asked to indicate their choices on a five-point Likert scale of gradation from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

3.3 Procedures

One researcher made a fifteen-minute scheduled visit to each class, introduced herself, explained the purposes of the study, and passed out a hard copy of the Student Questionnaire to those who had signed a blanket consent form for educational research at the beginning of the semester. This step was completed during week 12 and week 13 in a regular fifteen-week semester. Meanwhile, the Teacher Questionnaire was

distributed to the sixteen instructors. They were briefed on the purposes of the research and were asked to complete the survey at their convenience and return it to the researcher.

3.4 Data analysis

Responses to the surveys were sorted into figures to illustrate preference patterns, trends, and comparisons and contrasts in preferences between different proficiency levels of students and between students and teachers. Given the sample size and the nature and purposes of the study, the methodological objective of this study is not to project population trends based on random sampling. Instead, it aims to show how students and teachers in a specific program responded to practices of feedback in L2 writing classrooms. Insights gained from the survey findings are intended to give writing teachers some directions on where and how to proceed with their CF practices. The ultimate goal is for teachers to make informed decisions, with the hope that there would be useful implications for similar programs.

4. Results

4.1 Student preferences for feedback in L2 writing

Patterns of student preferences for feedback are delineated with graphic data and tentative explanations of what the patterns are likely to suggest for students and teachers. Preferences for each of the six dimensions, 'source', 'mode', 'tone', 'focus', 'scope', and 'explicitness' are also numerically represented by proportionality in the form of percentages to show the extent to which each dimension is preferred.

4.1.1. Source of feedback

Overall, the majority of respondents (42/70, 60%) preferred feedback given by teachers. The rest (28/70, 40%) desired feedback from both teachers and peers. None preferred feedback from peers only. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between student proficiency levels and preferences in feedback. It is clear that students' reliance on teachers as an exclusive source of feedback declined as their proficiency increased. Correspondingly, they became more inclined towards peers as a supplementary supplier of feedback. The contrast between Level 3 and Level 6 was most conspicuous: all except one from the lower level (7/8, 87.5%) desired feedback solely from teachers, whereas all except one from the higher level (5/6, 83.33%) preferred feedback from both teachers and peers.

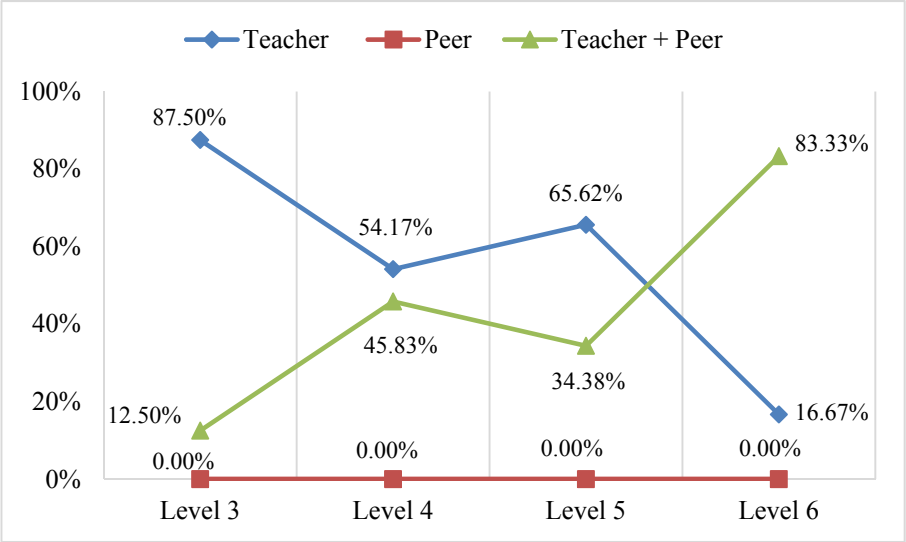

Figure 2. Student preferences: Source of feedback.

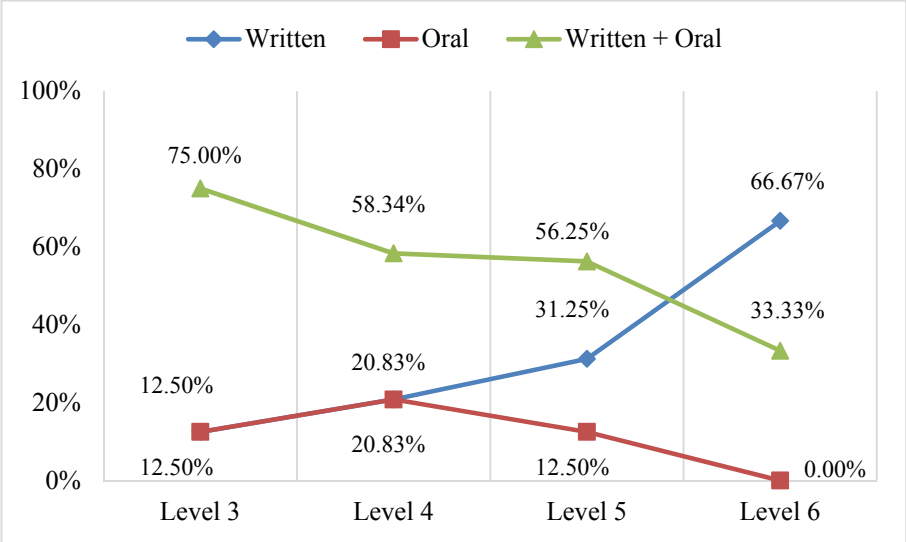

Figure 3. Student preferences: Mode of feedback.

4.1.3. Tone of feedback

A majority of the students preferred knowing both their strengths and weaknesses (48/70, 68.57%). When being forced to choose, they would rather be told what they have done wrong (18/70, 25.71%) than what they have done right (4/70, 5.71%). Proficiency did not seem to be a prominent factor in student preferences (see Figure 4). However, Levels 3 and 6 did differ from the two middle levels in that not a single student from the two ends of the proficiency continuum preferred to be only praised of their strengths.

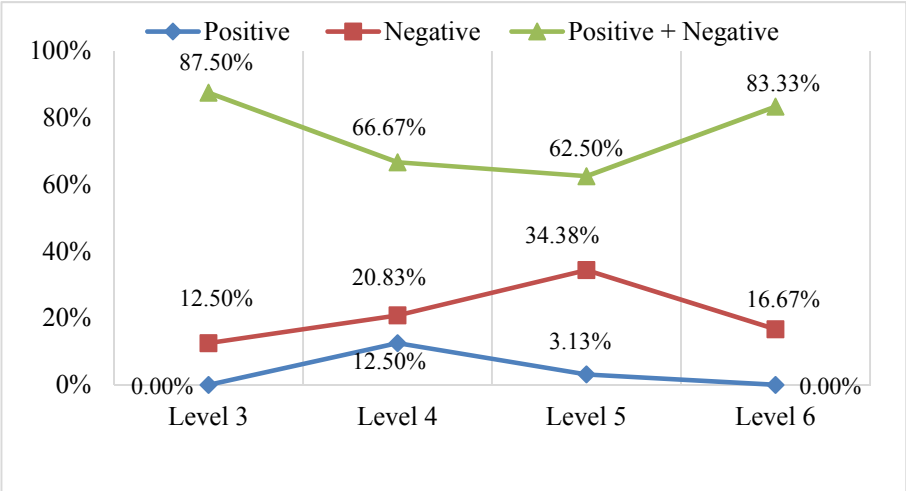

Figure 4. Student preferences: Scope of CF.

4.1.4. Focus of feedback

The students were allowed to choose more than one answer for this question. In total, they made 168 choices (Level 3, k = 17; Level 4, k = 61; Level 5, k = 72; and Level 6, k = 18). As shown in Figure 5, they overall demonstrated a balanced view of feedback targeting all three aspects of writing: content and organization (57/168, 33.93%), language use (59/168, 35.12%), and mechanics (52/168, 30.95%). Notwithstanding, Level 3 students desired feedback with a slightly heavier focus on language use (7/17, 41.18%). Those in Level 6 believed that feedback on all three aspects were equally important.

4.1.5. Scope of CF

Several respondents from Levels 3, 4, and 5 chose more than one answer for this question, which resulted in a total of 81 choices (Level 3, k = 13; Level 4, k = 28; Level 5, k = 34; and Level 6, k = 6). As Figure 6 illustrates, over half of the students preferred

receiving feedback on all of their errors (47/81, 58.02%), followed by major errors (29/81, 35.80%) and a few types of errors (5/81, 6.17%). Level 3 appeared markedly different from the rest in that over half of the students preferred being corrected only on major errors (7/13, 53.85%).

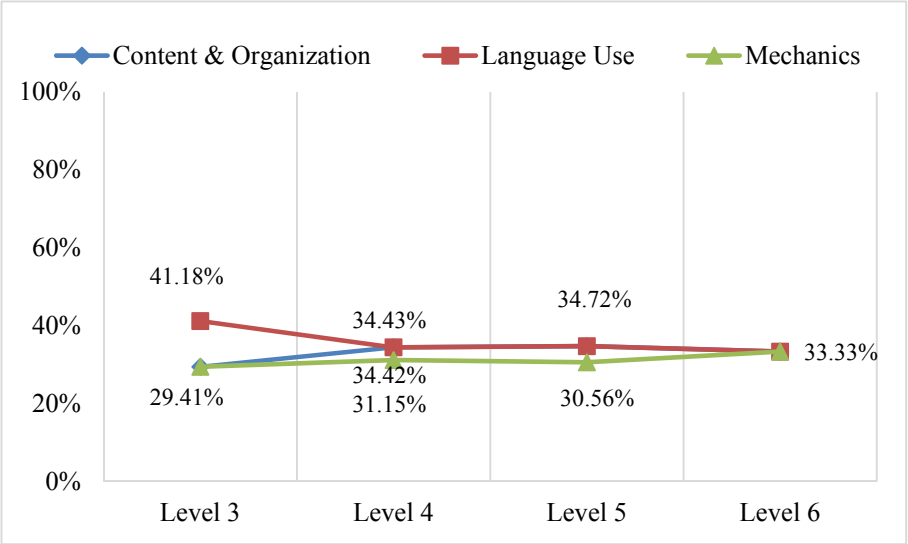

Figure 5. Student preferences: Focus of feedback.

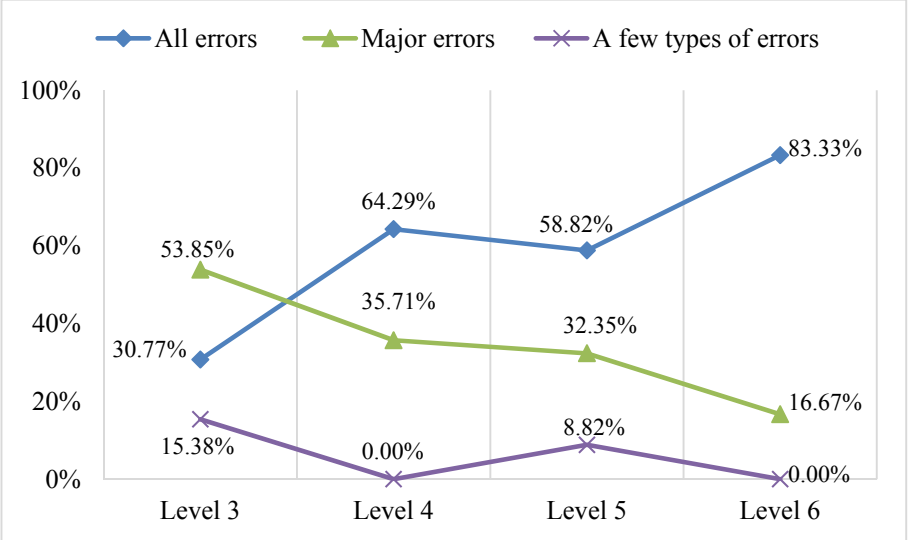

Figure 6. Student preferences: Scope of CF.

4.1.6. Explicitness of CF

In total, students made 447 choices for the seven questions in Part 2 of the questionnaire (Level 3, *k* = 56; Level 4, *k* = 147; Level 5, *k* = 203; and Level 6, *k* = 41). In general, students favored direct correction in conjunction with metalinguistic explanations (215/447, 48.10%) followed by direct correction without metalinguistic explanations (111/447, 24.83%). The next favorable choice was error coding (104/447, 23.27%). Error locating turned out as the least desirable option (17/447, 3.80%). As shown in Figure 7, Level 6 differed from the other three levels in that students at this level generally preferred error coding (20/41, 48.78%) to the three other types of CF.

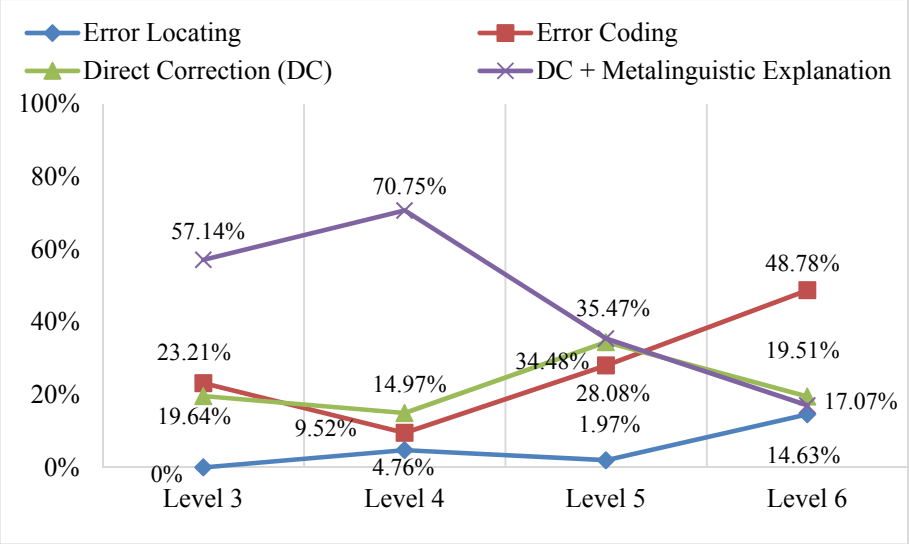

Figure 7. Student preferences: Explicitness of feedback.

4.2 Teachers' perceptions of feedback in L2 writing

The Likert scale for the Teacher Questionnaire allows informants to offer a spectrum of nuanced responses. However, in order to show a general pattern of teacher attitudes, the two positive responses, "Strongly Agree" and "Agree", were collapsed into "Agree", and the two negative responses, "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree", into "Disagree". Responses to the first three dimensions are organized in one graphic representation that shows teachers' views on peer feedback, oral feedback, and a combination of positive and negative feedback.

4.2.1. Source, mode, and tone of feedback

The teacher informants' responses with respect to the 'source', 'mode', and 'tone' of feedback are summarized in Figure 8. As seen, most teachers were ambivalent about the value of peer feedback (10/16, 62.50%); others were equally split between seeing it as either helpful (3/16, 18.75%) or unhelpful (3/16, 18.75%). In comparison, teachers demonstrated an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards oral feedback as a vast majority regarded it as helpful (15/16, 93.75%). Moreover, teachers unanimously agreed that feedback which incorporates both constructive criticism and praise is valuable.

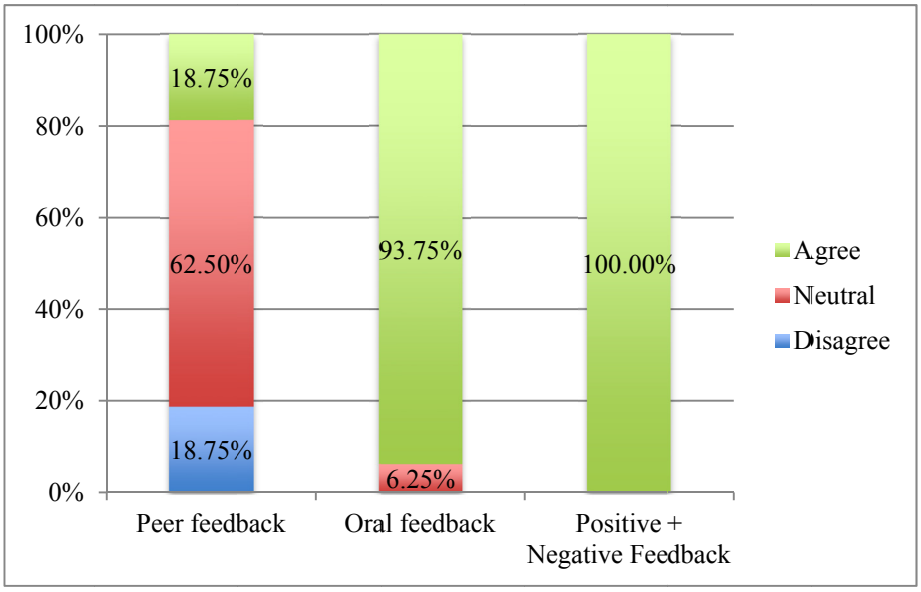

Figure 8. Teacher perceptions of the helpfulness of peer, oral, and mixed-tone feedback.

4.2.2. Focus of CF

Concerning feedback focusing on the three different aspects of L2 student writing, teachers were unanimously positive towards feedback on content and organization, overwhelmingly positive towards language use issues (15/16, 93.75%), and less so towards problems in mechanics (13/16, 81.25%) (see Figure 9).

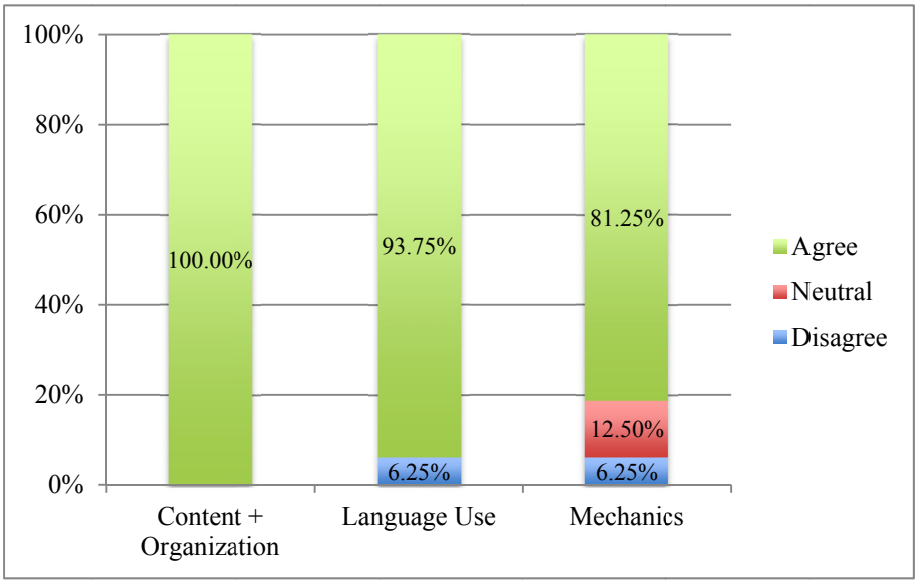

Figure 9. Teachers' perceptions of the helpfulness of feedback with different focus.

4.2.3. Scope of CF

Regarding the preferred amount of errors to cover, it appears that the teachers generally preferred focused CF to comprehensive CF. As Figure 10 illustrates, an overwhelming majority of the teachers (14/16, 87.50%) agreed that marking a few error types was helpful. In contrast, only half of the teachers (8/16, 50.00%) believed that marking major errors was helpful while the other half were evenly divided between neutral and disagree. Marking all errors seemed the least favorable choice as only slightly over one third of the teachers (6/16, 37.50%) viewed it as helpful whereas a slight majority (7/16, 43.75%) regarded it as unhelpful.

4.2.4. Explicitness of CF

With respect to the effectiveness of CF at various levels of explicitness, teachers believed that all four feedback methods were helpful. Nonetheless, error coding stood out as teachers' most favorable choice (13/16, 81.25%), followed by error locating (12/16, 72.50%), direct correction (10/16, 62.50%), and direct correction with metalinguistic explanations (9/16, 56.25%). Overall, teachers favored indirect (error locating and error coding) over direct CF (direct correction with or without metalinguistic explanations) (see Figure 11).

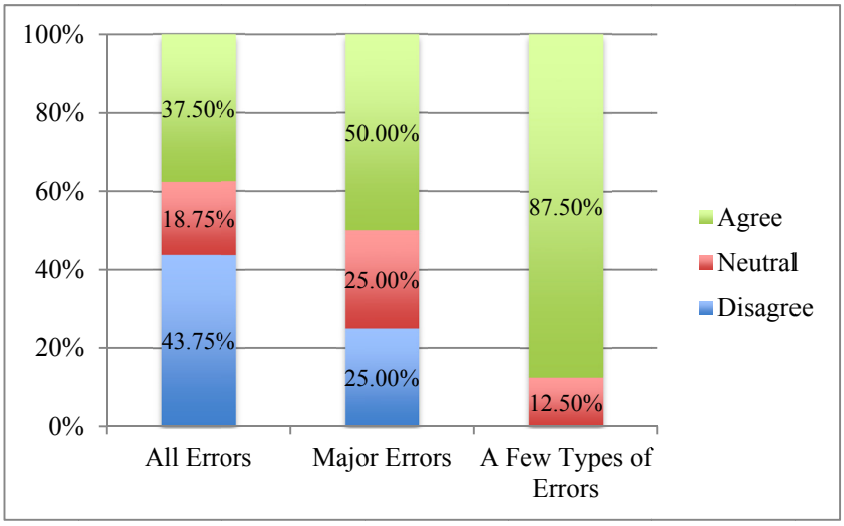

Figure 10. Teachers' perceptions of the helpfulness of CF with different scopes.

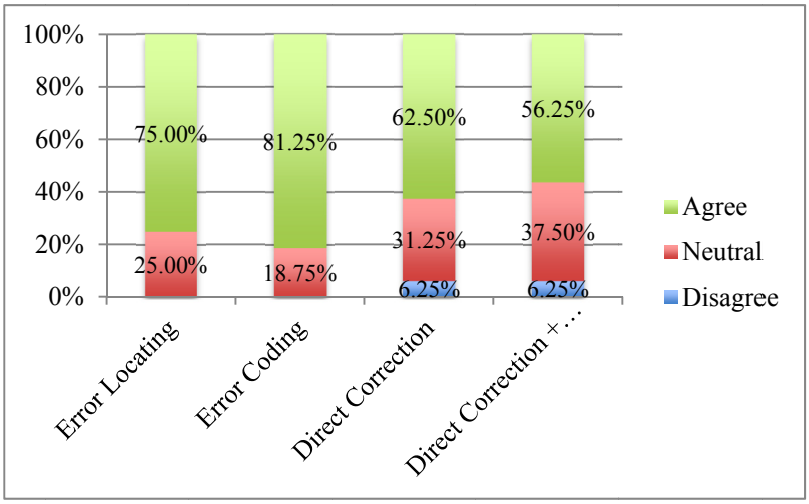

Figure 11. Teachers' preconceptions of CF of different level of explicitness.

5. Discussions and implications for L2 writing instruction

The survey conducted under the framework of the six dimensions of feedback in L2 writing revealed preference patterns by students and teachers and exactly where the two sides aligned and where they diverged. In addition, general L2 proficiency plays an intricate role in how students view feedback and its impact on learning.

5.1 Source of feedback

One overriding finding is that students at all proficiency levels preferred teachers' guidance in error identification and correction, and none expressed faith in relying on peers as the sole source of feedback. This concurs with the result in Chang's (2016) synthesis study of L2 students' perceptions of peer review. L2 writing is unique in that students learn to write in a new language they are still learning. Teachers' guidance as a source of knowledge and assistance is indispensable in this learning process, and was predictably acknowledged by students in this survey. Higher proficiency students in this study showed a more positive attitude towards peer feedback, suggesting that they had reached a psychologically comfortable level of proficiency to evaluate such feedback. Higher proficiency also allowed them to see more clearly the merits of peer feedback. On the other hand, lower proficiency students lacked the linguistic knowledge and hence sufficient confidence in either providing feedback to others or correcting their own errors as they are still grappling with the language itself. Peer review, therefore, is probably more productive at higher levels of proficiency when students have reached a linguistic and rhetorical threshold where peer-to-peer interactions are meaningful and beneficial.

Most teachers, on the other hand, were skeptical of the value of peer feedback. It is likely that such sentiment arose out of their concern about L2 students' limited linguistic and rhetorical competence. Their concern is not unwarranted, though, since students who are more accepting of peer review tend to be at higher proficiency levels too. Those who advocate for peer review might see it as a valuable reciprocal learning process that benefits both feedback receivers and givers (e.g., Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Zhu, 2010; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). As revealed in empirical research, the peer response process can generate intense negotiations among students over who made what errors and how they could be corrected, which is likely to result in improved writing in both rhetorical organization and language use (e.g., Ruegg, 2017). Likewise, as students become increasingly aware of their own weaknesses as well as those of their peers, they develop metalinguistic awareness and analytical ability to rectify not only issues at hand, but also to improve the overall tenor of their writing (Chong, 2017). On these grounds, peer review should be encouraged and practiced with teachers as the facilitators and the main sources of authoritative feedback (Jacob, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Zacharias, 2007).

5.2 Mode of feedback

The survey shows students' overall preference for a combination of written and oral feedback, corroborating the findings in previous studies (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Rafiei & Salehi, 2016; Reed & Burton, 1985). The expectations for both written and oral feedback reflect students' natural tendency to read and absorb teachers' written feedback and their willingness to follow up with the teacher when further clarification and explanation of the written comments and corrections are needed.

Given the choice of written or oral feedback, students were in favor of the former. It is clear that written comments spur more offline thinking removed from the immediate, on-the- spot pressure during face-to-face interactions with the teacher. Digesting written feedback and acting on it in the revision process is a more deliberate process than listening to oral feedback and acting later based on memory or notes unless it is recorded, as reported in Huang's (2000) research. Although written feedback has permanency and consistency, the amount of information that can be conveyed is often constrained by space, and its quality relies on teachers' expertise in providing succinct and actionable written comments. In contrast, oral feedback enjoys the advantage of immediate clarity as teachers can explain and paraphrase until students completely understand the feedback. This is especially useful in addressing rhetorical issues or meaning-related language problems which require elaborate back-and-forth negotiations (Ferris, 2014).

Perhaps exactly because of this advantage, teachers viewed oral feedback as helpful to students. They may have the implicit belief that orally conveyed feedback is not only more effective but more efficient than taking the time to laboriously write down comments that students may or may not completely understand. Given the gap between teacher and student where the latter favored written and written plus oral feedback if both were offered, teachers might be best served by adopting the written plus oral mix of feedback for lower proficiency students while using written feedback alone for more advanced students as the latter can more capably absorb the intentions of the teacher and revise their work accordingly. In any scenario where a student experiences difficulty in understanding written feedback, the oral option should be made available.

5.3 Tone of feedback

Regardless of L2 proficiency, the students favored being told of both their weaknesses and strengths, which echoes findings in earlier research (Cardelle & Corno, 1981; Liao, 2004). Such preference should be expected since the primary purpose of feedback is to inform students of 'where they are', 'where they need to go', and 'how to get there' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). When being asked to choose between the two tones (negative vs. positive), students would rather be told of their weaknesses than strengths. This indicates their openness to improve their areas of weakness to make progress. An added observation is that students at the two ends of the proficiency continuum appeared to be more open to criticisms without the soothing effects of praises than those in the middle, who desired both praise and criticisms. This partially contradicts Nemati et al.'s (2017) finding that intermediate and advanced EFL learners showed a stronger inclination toward being acknowledged of the strengths in their writing than their weaknesses. This is an area of inquiry which warrants further investigation.

Concerning the tone in CF, teachers aligned themselves with students and showed unanimous approval of feedback conveyed in a balanced tone. It makes sense that pointing out errors to students opens ways for them to see where they need to improve,

while recognizing their strengths serves as a confidence booster for them to write more and better. Regardless of advanced students' capacity to handle criticisms, an overly harsh tone can deflate their spirit, and worst of all, inhibit them from wanting to write more (Martin, Veldman, & Anderson, 1980). From the learning perspective, teachers should strive for a balance among the three functions of feedback: to praise, to criticize, and to suggest (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Each goal serves a distinct pedagogical purpose: encouraging students to build on what they do well, making students aware of where they need to improve, and pointing students in the right direction with specific tips. Meanwhile teachers should also be sensitive to the needs of students at varying levels of L2 proficiency when implementing these strategies.

5.4 Focus of feedback

Students generally preferred to receive feedback on both global and local issues in their writing. This distinguishes them from L2 learners in other studies who preferred either form-focused feedback (Saito, 1994) or content-oriented feedback (Enginarlar, 1993; Junqueira & Payant, 2015). High-quality writing must demonstrate both global control of content and organizational structure and the local command of lexical and grammatical choices to support the essay as a whole. What students prefer to focus on, though, may be a function of their conceptualization of what counts as "good writing" in their L1 and L2 as well as the objectives of the writing curriculum that teachers convey to them (Séror, 2009). Again, students' preferences appeared to be associated with their L2 proficiency. Lower level students showed preferences for feedback on language errors as they were still struggling with basic language use. Those who have achieved an above-threshold proficiency level and experience less difficulty with the language were more inclined to focus on global issues, a transformative shift from linguistic survival to high-level thinking in the composing process.

The expressivist view of writing as a means of self-discovery, promoting the emergent personal voice, and empowerment of the novice's inner writer is often more dominant in L1 composition than L2 writing (Ferris, 2014). Teachers who themselves were trained under such ideology are often more concerned with clarity of expression of ideas organized coherently than accuracy in grammar and vocabulary use (Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010). This is clearly the case in this study, where teachers were more positive about global feedback than they were about local feedback. This is an ongoing debate on what writing is — as a process where intellectual development is of paramount importance or as a product that shows evidence of learning of a language that successfully expresses this intellectual development.

It must be acknowledged that in L2 writing feedback on both rhetorical aspects of writing and language use contributes to L2 development as a whole. How to prioritize feedback strategies, though, depends on student needs and curricular expectations such as writing for academic purposes, as is the case in the current study of writing in an intensive English program vs. for example, technical writing in the workplace. Writing pedagogy, whether adopting a balanced approach that the students in this study

preferred or teaching them how to achieve certain rhetorical goals, is a matter of needs analysis and stated curricular and task goals, as well as the extent to which students' L2 proficiency level can accommodate these goals.

5.5 Scope of CF

This study reveals students' overall preferences for CF on all errors, concurring with the results from previous studies (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2005; Leki, 1991; Nemati et al., 2017). CF focusing on major errors was the second favored option. CF targeting select error types did not appear to be a desirable solution. The gradation from "correct everything", "correct major errors", to "correct certain types of errors" reflects students' desire to improve their writing wherever and whenever they can with the help of the teacher. What they did not realize was that not all writing issues can be rectified overnight, in one or two drafts. In the meantime, it also shows their strategic thinking, becoming selective of what they prefer if they cannot get everything — going from a broad-based desire to learn everything to a more specific target that they can better manage, which more closely aligns with teachers' thinking.

Following Nemati et al. (2017), the present study also found that lower proficiency students prefer focused CF, specifically feedback targeting major errors. This is understandable since the less proficient students need to focus on 'getting the message across'. This often means straightening out major grammatical mishaps and misused or misleading vocabulary that impede readers' ability to understand their essays. Higher-level proficiency students, by contrast, were more open to comprehensive CF as they tended to produce fewer errors to begin with and were able to address a wider range of errors which should be smaller in number than the range of errors that their less proficient peers made.

Teachers' beliefs, on the other hand, were markedly different from students' preferences, especially those at the lower end of proficiency. They preferred focusing on a select few error types or major errors to marking all errors. As pointed out in the literature, comprehensive CF may not be as effective as the focused approach (e.g., Kang & Han, 2015). Correcting everything, especially in a student essay with pervasive errors big and small, may very well be ineffective and inefficient. In particular, students at lower levels of proficiency may not be linguistically and rhetorically ready to absorb all the CF, be it directly or indirectly given, despite their intuitive desire to be corrected. Moreover, commenting on and correcting everything may overwhelm students quickly and demotivate them when they see themselves as scaringly far from reaching their objectives. For teachers, offering comprehensive feedback can be physically and mentally draining as well (Lee, 2005). Strategically selecting a few errors or error types based on individual students' ability to understand and address them in the CF process gives them an achievable goal which boosts their confidence in moving forward, even incrementally (Zacharias, 2007). The goal of a writing task, whether it aims to promote fluency, accuracy, or complexity, should also be taken into consideration when making decisions on how many and which errors to correct.

On balance, the desire of higher proficiency L2 learners to have all their errors marked can be satisfied since they generally produce fewer errors to begin with. For lower proficiency learners, however, despite their eagerness to know all their errors, the most pedagogically viable remedy is to prioritize errors in their relative importance and correct only the major errors or select types of errors as the focus of instruction (McMartin-Miller, 2014).

5.6 Explicitness of CF

Overall, students preferred direct correction accompanied by metalinguistic explanations. A similar general pattern has been noted in a few previous studies (e.g., Nemati et al., 2017; Shin, 2008; Wanchild, 2015; Zhu, 2010). Not surprisingly, lower-level students appeared more dependent on teachers for error correction and rule explanation. Their higher-level peers, by contrast, showed more learner agency and autonomy, as illustrated by their inclination to get help only in identifying errors but not in getting teachers to actually correct them.

From a general learning perspective, if direct correction makes things right for students, indirect correction helps them restructure rules in their interlanguage system and apply the newly adjusted rules to produce more accurate writing in the future. The learning process that actively engages students produces the best outcomes because they are in control of their own learning. This explains why teachers in this study, by and large, considered indirect CF as more helpful, particularly error coding, which tells students the error categories that require special attention. The advantages of indirect CF in L2 learning are well supported by empirical research (e.g., Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014).

While teachers help students improve their writing by correcting and explaining their errors, the ultimate goal of teachers and any pedagogy they adopt should be to help students help themselves, in a carefully calibrated process that moves lower proficiency students towards more autonomous learning (Gentner & Holyoak, 1997). An eclectic approach that takes into account student L2 proficiency levels and preferences for learning styles will likely achieve such a goal. Merely pointing out that an error exists without saying what kind of error it is or without showing a corrected version is helpful so long as students can figure it out and self-correct on their own, which requires their adequate knowledge in the L2.

6. Conclusion

This study addresses a specific group of students in a university ESL program where they strived to elevate their academic writing competence with the help of a specific group of teachers. The findings uniquely describe student and teacher sentiments about the nuts and bolts of feedback in the writing classes of their program.

6.1 Summary of the major findings

Students at all levels shared similarities in their preferences for feedback. They all regarded teachers as the most credible source of feedback, preferred written feedback followed by oral explanations, were curious about both the strengths and weaknesses in their writing, wished to know both their rhetorical problems and language errors, and preferred teachers to mark all their errors and correct them directly.

It is also clear from this study that proficiency plays an intricate role in how students view feedback and its impact on learning. Higher L2 proficiency appears to afford greater learner agency and autonomy than lower L2 proficiency would. It leads to more open-mindedness toward peer feedback, more confidence in handling comprehensive and written only feedback, and higher-level preference for implicit feedback from teachers. It is also worth noting that while proficiency overall played a role in how students responded to the six dimensions, its influence nevertheless manifested itself in different strengths in the six dimensions. For example, while proficiency appeared to strongly affect students' choice of written feedback over oral feedback, its influence was considerably diminished when the same students contemplated where the feedback should focus on, with a slight edge for the lower level students who favored more feedback on language use. As previously pointed out, higher proficiency learners tended to be more autonomous in learning from their own errors than lower proficiency students, and as all groups progressed, they preferred feedback to be focused on all three areas of concern (content/organization, language use, and mechanics). The results also reveal that the six dimensions of feedback in the framework are interconnected. For example, those higher-level proficiency students who expressed preference to rely less on teachers as a source of feedback also preferred written rather than oral feedback. When they did desire teachers' written feedback, error coding was all they needed.

Teachers' views overlapped those of their students on certain issues: they regarded oral feedback, feedback on both rhetorical issues and language use, and feedback in a balanced tone as helpful. Their perceptions contradicted students' preferences on other aspects: they were neutral toward peer review, reluctant to correct every error they see, and inclined toward indirect CF.

6.2 Pedagogical implications

The similarities and differences between the two sides can help both see the value of their views and are instructional for teachers when they contemplate the most effective feedback strategies. In other words, teachers need to know what students are thinking in order to help them improve their writing. A needs analysis of the writing program and a quick survey of the type adopted in this study about what motivates students to improve their writing could provide useful information that helps teachers adopt the best corrective strategies. In the meantime, it should be cautioned that learning about students' preferences does not mean what they tell teachers is necessarily conducive to their learning. Students' preferences were likely to have been influenced by their own

styles of leaning and distinct English learning experiences in their home countries. They need direction and guidance which may be in conflict with their preferred ways of receiving and responding to feedback. Teachers, on the other hand, have their perspectives on how to best deliver L2 writing instruction given their knowledge of the unique nature and processes of L2 writing as opposed to regular composition by native speakers. Teachers can use the best strategies to bridge the gaps when they arise, such as carefully nudging students towards more focus on rhetorical quality as they progress in their control of the conventions of written English, with less insistence in correcting every single language error. In practice, the most beneficial type of feedback for specific learners should not only take into account the role of their L2 proficiency but also other factors such as the appropriate selection of error types for correction to meet task-specific goals and the consideration of curricular objectives.

6.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Since this is not an experimental study but one that tapped into an existing pool of students and available teachers, data collected from such limited, non-randomized sources are necessarily descriptive. The patterns and trends observed are context-specific and may not reflect student and teacher beliefs in a drastically different demographic and educational environment. Methodologically, a more systematic data gathering using a more stratified and numerically controlled sample (e.g., a fair number of randomly selected participants evenly distributed at different proficiency levels) would have made statistical analysis possible in order to gauge group variance on the six dimensions of the framework. In addition, concurrent ethnographic and action research would have ensured more validity and generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the Teacher Questionnaire did not give respondents the flexibility to express different views on the basis of students' L2 proficiency level. Finally, not all possible combinations of feedback strategies are included in the teacher questionnaire. These issues should be addressed in future research. However, regardless of these limitations, if this study inspires L2 writing researchers and practitioners to reflect on the overall scheme of feedback in their ESL program and initiate changes and adjust strategies to help students write more and better, it has achieved its intended purposes.

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Appendix A: Student Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is for the researcher to learn about your preferences for feedback in English academic writing. Please answer all the questions honestly. All responses will remain anonymous. Thank you for your participation!

Respondent Background

Age: _____
Gender: □ Male □ Female
Proficiency level: □ 3 □ 4 □ 5 □ 6
First language: □ Arabic □ Chinese □ Japanese □ Korean □ Other _____

Part 1. Please circle the answer that best shows your opinion.

1. I'd like to receive _____ feedback on my writing.
A. teacher
B. peer (classmates')
C. both A and B

2. I'd like teachers to _____ their feedback on my writing.
A. write down
B. have a face-to-face discussion of
C. both A and B

3. I'd like to know _____ in my writing.
A. what I have done right
B. what I have done wrong
C. both A and B

4. I'd like to receive feedback on the _____ in my essay.
A. content and organization
B. grammar and vocabulary
C. spelling, capitalization, and punctuation (e.g., , . ; : ! ?)
D. all of above

5. I'd like teachers to point out _____ grammar errors.
A. all
B. only serious
C. a few types of

Part 2. All of the sentences below have a grammar error. Please circle the type of corrective feedback that you think as most helpful.

1. The children go skatting in the winter.
A. The children go skatting in the winter.
B. The children go skatting in the winter.
sp (spelling)
C. The children go ~~skatting~~ skating in the winter.
D. The children go ~~skatting~~ skating in the winter.
You don't need to double 't' here. Delete 'e' and add –'ing'.

2. These furnitures are beautiful.
A. These furnitures are beautiful.
B. These furnitures are beautiful.
wf (word form)
C. ~~These~~ This piece of furnitures ~~are~~ is beautiful.
D. ~~These~~ This piece of furnitures ~~are~~ is beautiful.
Furniture is an uncountable noun; therefore, you cannot add '-s' to make it plural.

3. We saw child in the playground.
A. We saw child in the playground.
B. We saw child in the playground.
art (article)
C. We saw a child in the playground.
D. We saw a child in the playground.
The indefinite article "a" is needed before the word "child".

4. I have my car, and my husband has theirs.
A. I have my car, and my husband has theirs.
B. I have my car, and my husband has theirs.
pron (pronoun)
C. I have my car, and my husband has theirs his.
D. I have my car, and my husband has theirs his.
"My husband" is male and singular, so use "his" instead of "theirs".

5. The student think tomorrow is a holiday.
A. The student think tomorrow is a holiday.
B. The student think tomorrow is a holiday.
sv (subject verb agreement)
C. The student thinks tomorrow is a holiday.
D. The student thinks tomorrow is a holiday.
The subject and verb must agree in number.

6. Where there were mice.
A. Where there were mice.
B. Where there were mice.
frag (sentence fragment)
C. Where there were mice.
Peter left the apartment where there were mice.
D. Peter left the apartment where there were mice.
You need to add an independent clause to make the sentence complete.

7. My sister loves to dance she is very good at it.
A. My sister loves to dance she is very good at it.
B. My sister loves to dance she is very good at it.
ro (run-on sentence)
C. My sister loves to dance she is very good at it.
My sister loves to dance; she is very good at it. or
My sister loves to dance, and she is very good at it.
D. My sister loves to dance; she is very good at it.
My sister loves to dance; she is very good at it. or
My sister loves to dance, and she is very good at it.
You cannot join two independent clauses without using proper punctuation and a conjunction.

Appendix B: Teacher Questionnaire

Please circle a number from 1 – 5 to indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements.

| 1 = strongly disagree | 2 = disagree | 3 = neutral | 4 = agree | 5 = strongly agree |

		☹ ☺
1	Peer feedback is useful in helping students improve their writing.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
2	Face-to-face conference with students to explain the written feedback is helpful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
3	Giving both positive and negative feedback is helpful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
4	Comments on the content and organization of students' essays are helpful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
5	Comments on linguistic errors in students' essays are helpful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
6	Comments on mechanical errors in students' essays are helpful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
7	Marking all linguistic errors in students' essays is useful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
8	Marking only major errors (meaning interfering) is useful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
9	Marking only a few types of errors each time is useful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
10	Indicating the location of students' errors (via underlining/circling/highlighting) is helpful for self-correction.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
11	Indicating the location of students' errors and using editing symbols to indicate the type of errors is useful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
12	Providing direct correction of students' errors is useful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5
13	Providing direct correction with brief metalinguistic explanations is helpful.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Thank you for your participation