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# Exploring EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices about Written Feedback Strategy, Scope, and Focus

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**Abstract:** Effective written feedback is crucial to student learning and developing writing skills. Responding to student writing is a multifaceted and complex process that requires a more nuanced understanding of second language writing research. This study explored teachers' beliefs and practices about written feedback, which may be influenced by a range of factors. Data were collected from four middle-school English teachers in China via stimulated recall tasks and semi-structured interviews reflecting retrospectively on how and why teachers gave feedback to student writing. Findings revealed intersections between feedback strategy and learner proficiency level; feedback scope and time constraints, including teacher workload; and feedback focus and contextual factors. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to teacher professional development, contextualized teacher education, and the changing landscape of written feedback practices in the age of AI.

**Keywords:** written corrective feedback, teacher beliefs, L2 writing

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Feedback is an essential component of second language (L2) writing development and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' pedagogical practices. Feedback provides learners with performance-related information for further improvement (Henderson et al., 2019). While teacher feedback is generally focused on local errors relating to form and mechanics (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Yang et al., 2021), there has been a shift to responding to errors beyond the local domain, including global issues (i.e., content and organization; Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The integration of feedback in the learning process is underpinned by various second language acquisition (SLA) theories, including the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), interactional hypothesis (Long, 1996), and output hypothesis (Swain, 1991), all of which highlight the potential benefits of feedback as a noticing facilitator, an interaction channel, and a response to learner-generated linguistic output.

The efficacy of teacher feedback is crucial to learners' improvement in writing ability because teachers' feedback has a higher uptake rate than automated or peer feedback among learners (Tian & Zhou, 2020). Research suggests that teachers' perceptions of feedback can significantly influence their teaching behaviors, such as their actual feedback practice (Lee & Mohebbi, 2020; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). Thus, to improve the effectiveness of teacher feedback, it is necessary to explore teachers' beliefs about feedback and unravel the factors that shape and reinforce their practices, such as teaching experience, training, learner proficiency level, and teaching workload. While it is recognized that teachers' beliefs play a significant role in their teaching practices, qualitative studies examining teachers' beliefs about feedback remain scarce compared to quantitative studies that assess the effectiveness of different types of feedback (Chong, 2019). Given that previous research has largely focused on local issues in feedback (e.g., Lim & Renandya, 2020; Shintani et al., 2014), the present study presents a more comprehensive overview of teachers' beliefs and practices concerning feedback strategy,

scope, and focus. This study contributes to the understanding of what EFL teachers think and do about feedback provision by analyzing four teachers' perceptions and practices in a middle school in China.

## Literature Review

### Teachers' Beliefs about Feedback and Influencing Factors

Teachers' beliefs are an important part of their "teacher cognition," which is defined as "what teachers think, know, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the classroom" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). Research shows that teachers generally recognize the crucial role of written feedback in L2 writing classrooms and maintain a positive attitude toward it, hoping that it will help raise students' awareness to avoid making the same mistakes in the future (Rajab et al., 2016; Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıkanlı, 2019). However, some teachers were concerned because they observed that, at times, their students made minimal progress in writing accuracy compared to the time and energy the teachers dedicated to providing feedback (Lee, 2013). The ineffectiveness of feedback may be attributed to time constraints and student attitudes (Al-Bakri, 2016; Mahmood et al., 2022).

Teachers can have different preferences for feedback types because of the influence of individual and contextual factors. As one of the most critical factors affecting teachers' beliefs and practices, teaching experience is positively associated with classroom practice, including classroom management, teaching skills, creativity (Dewaele et al., 2018), and students' achievements (Madigan & Kim, 2021). The existing research has mainly compared novice and experienced teachers in higher education contexts. In a study involving 15 Iranian teachers, Norouzian (2015) found that the more experienced the teachers were, the more inclined they were to mark errors selectively and directly. Golpour et al.'s (2020) research with 53 novice and 67 experienced teachers, also in an Iranian EFL context, found that more experienced teachers emphasized

correcting major errors and organization errors. On the other hand, less experienced teachers believed they only needed to mark errors that caused a meaning breakdown, and vocabulary errors were the most helpful kind of errors to be indicated for students. Such empirical evidence reveals that teachers' beliefs and practices about feedback may change with the accumulation of teaching experience.

Another individual factor that can influence their feedback practice is teachers' training. Lee (2013) pointed out that training in the area of feedback is crucial and can raise teachers' awareness of more effective strategies to enhance students' feedback uptake. By tracking 52 participants from their student period to the stage of teachers-to-be, Aljasir (2021) discovered a slight but generally contingent shift in their beliefs about written corrective feedback. After 6 months of training, students still favored global feedback, but they shifted from preferring only indirect and unfocused feedback to valuing both direct and indirect unfocused feedback. This finding indicates that teacher training is likely to influence teachers' beliefs and practices about written corrective feedback. However, not all teachers receive training on assessing and responding to student writing (Lee, 2008).

Existing research also shows that teachers' feedback beliefs and practices can be affected by contextual factors. Lee (2004) suggested that while indirect feedback is more appropriate for advanced learners, direct feedback could be used for less proficient students who may not have enough knowledge and resources to decode indirect feedback (Kartchava et al., 2021). However, some teachers may believe that students are capable of correcting all errors regardless of their proficiency levels and error types and should, therefore, be encouraged to become independent learners (Al-Bakri, 2016). Moreover, time constraints may affect teachers' feedback practice by leading teachers to give more indirect corrective feedback on minor errors (Hidayah et al., 2021). As Van Beuningen (2010) explained, time constraints and heavy workloads often prevent teachers from providing detailed written corrective

feedback, which requires significant time and energy. Overall, while teachers generally maintain positive attitudes toward feedback, their actual practices vary because of the influence of various factors.

### Types of Feedback

Written feedback can be classified into different types based on various criteria. Ellis (2009) proposed categorizing written corrective feedback by feedback strategy (i.e., direct, indirect, or metalinguistic feedback) or students' action upon feedback (i.e., revision required or only attention required). Cheng et al. (2021) explored teacher-written feedback from three aspects: feedback strategy, feedback scope, and feedback focus. This framework is generated from previous literature and captures the essential characteristics of written feedback. Considering that this study explored written feedback beyond linguistic levels from only teachers' perspectives, the current study used the interpretative framework of Cheng et al. (2021).

### Feedback Strategy

Feedback strategy concerns whether learners receive direct, metalinguistic, or indirect feedback on errors. Direct feedback provides students with correct answers or solutions to the error, while indirect feedback only identifies where the error occurs (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Metalinguistic feedback also withholds correct answers or solutions from students, but it offers students cues, such as a short description or an error code indicating the nature of the error (Li & Vuono, 2019). Ellis (2009) argued that this feedback practice differs from only indicating errors because metalinguistic cues provide learners with explicit information on the types of errors they have made and guidance on correcting their mistakes. However, Karim and Nassaji (2020) viewed metalinguistic feedback as one type of indirect feedback because these two types of feedback only differ in the degree of explicitness and share the same key feature of error identification criterion without providing correct answers or solutions.

The present study took the stance of Karim and Nassaji (2020) and categorized metalinguistic feedback as a form of indirect feedback. Researchers have endeavored to uncover which feedback type is more effective in improving learners' L2 writing (Karim & Nassaji, 2020). Some suggest that other variables, such as feedback scope and learners' L2 proficiency levels, must be considered to examine whether direct or indirect feedback is more effective (Abalkheel & Brandenburg, 2020). Apart from the research on feedback efficacy, recent literature has also explored teachers' actual feedback practice. For instance, there is evidence that Chinese secondary school teachers (the participant population in the present study) prefer providing indirect written feedback over direct feedback (Li & He, 2017).

### **Feedback Scope**

Feedback scope refers to the range of feedback provision, or whether teachers correct (a) all errors, (b) several types of errors, or (c) only one type of error when providing feedback. The first type of feedback (correcting all errors) is considered comprehensive feedback (Van Beuningen et al., 2012), and the third type (correcting only one type of error) is focused feedback (Ellis et al., 2008). The second category (correcting a range of errors) can be classified as focused feedback if specific error types are pre-selected or unfocused feedback if no particular errors are targeted (Ellis et al., 2008). To better clarify the differences between comprehensive feedback and feedback that addresses only a limited range of errors, the current study uses the term *focused feedback* to encompass the second feedback category. Researchers hold divergent views on the most effective range of feedback provision, but empirical studies that compare the efficacy of different feedback scopes are limited (Mao & Lee, 2020).

Additionally, teachers' preferences in feedback provision may vary. For instance, Lee (2004) found that many EFL teachers preferred comprehensive feedback due to school requirements, student preferences,

and teacher accountability. Still, others may adopt focused feedback based on the importance or prevalence of the error (Guénette & Lyster, 2013) or curricular content and teaching objectives at a particular stage (Yang et al., 2021).

### **Feedback Focus**

Feedback focus pertains to whether feedback responds more to errors in the language, content, or organization level in a piece of writing. Another similar classification divides written corrective feedback into two categories: (a) local feedback, which focuses on language aspects like spelling and syntax, and (b) global feedback, which focuses on ideas, logic, content, and organization (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Research focusing on the types of errors teachers most frequently respond to indicates that linguistic accuracy receives more attention from teachers despite their intention to comment on all levels of writing (Saliu-Abdulahi et al., 2017). Niu et al. (2021) found that teachers provided more local than global feedback, with the former tending to address form-focused problems and the latter tending to address meaning-oriented issues. Despite the teachers' preference for local feedback, many scholars have offered recommendations to provide feedback across different aspects of writing so that learners can make more balanced progress in L2 writing (Cheng & Zhang, 2021; Ferris, 2014).

Despite the importance of teachers' beliefs about feedback practices, there is scarce scholarly attention on how personal and contextual factors may shape and reinforce teachers' practices regarding feedback strategy, scope, and focus. The present study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore four EFL teachers' beliefs and practices through semi-structured interviews and a stimulated recall task after marking student writing samples.

## Methods

### Context of the Study

The present study took place in a middle school EFL context in Zhejiang, China. In English writing classes, middle school students in China learn to use basic sentence structures to convey ideas with appropriate discourse structure (i.e., introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion) and correct grammar. Advanced students can use the elaborate expressions presented in the textbook (e.g., complex sentences and phrases) when writing essays and organize the text in a coherent way. Students usually practice English writing once or twice per week, and they increase their writing practice to three times a week for two weeks in preparation for the final exam.

English teachers in China need to hold certificates of English language proficiency and teaching skills from the National Ministry of Education, and they work with a strong sense of duty in their daily practices. When preparing their day-to-day teaching work regarding students' writing, teachers think about text structure, writing samples, exemplars, and textbook words and sentences that can be used in writing. In their classes, teachers then guide students in generating words and sentences and analyzing the text structure of sample writings. When providing feedback, teachers often refer to the grading rubrics to comment on the structure and point out grammar mistakes students overlook. Teachers also give students positive feedback for well-constructed expressions and sometimes offer individual meetings. However, teachers' feedback practices are sometimes hindered by the large class size and heavy workload involved in preparing for and giving lectures, grading homework, and communicating with students and parents.

### Participants

This study employed a convenience and criterion sampling method. The school principal recommended four female English teachers based

on their professional performance, and they were invited to participate in the study. The teachers, Nina, Nancy, Talia, and Tracy (pseudonyms), had 2, 3, 22, and 19 years of teaching experience, respectively, at the time of data collection. Speaking Mandarin as their first language (L1), they all had a bachelor's degree in English. They were full-time English teachers, each responsible for two separate classes (around 45 students per class), with a teaching load of five 45-minute English lessons per week for each class. None had overseas learning experiences or extra teaching duties outside of school. They said they sometimes delivered e-feedback through tablets, but paper-based writing and marking practices were still standard because of paper-based summative tests.

### Data Sources

#### *Student Writing Samples*

The writing samples were collected from a paper-based summative assessment of Grade 8 students (L1-Mandarin) in the aforementioned middle school. Students in Grade 8 at Chinese middle schools are considered to have pre-intermediate English proficiency equivalent to CEFR A2 (Zhao et al., 2017). Students generally spent 15–20 minutes finishing the writing task in response to the following prompt:

暑期将至，合理安排能让假期更充实。XX 区某校布置了特殊的“四个一”暑期社会实践活动：参加一次志愿活动、参观一座博物馆、分享一本好书、承担一件家务，以此激发他们责任感和使命感。请你根据表格内容结合自身情况，写一篇短文阐述你的计划和原因。[Summer vacation is coming soon, and planning well can make the holiday more fulfilling. A school in XX District has arranged a special “Four Ones” summer social practice activity: volunteering, visiting a museum, sharing a book, and doing housework. The activities aim to inspire their sense of responsibility and mission. Based on this, please write a short essay about your plan and reasons.]

Students needed to cover these four points within 80 to 100 words, and the introduction sentence was given. The four participating teachers

marked and provided handwritten feedback on the texts of every student in their class based on the grading rubrics; they then chose texts from the higher proficiency students in their classes as writing samples for this research study. Within three days after the exam, Nina, Nancy, Talia, and Tracy selected 13, 9, 10, and 11 texts, respectively, from their classes and then scanned and emailed the texts with their handwritten feedback to the first author.

### *Stimulated Recall Tasks*

The first author initially reviewed the teachers' feedback practices on students' writing samples to tailor the interview questions. One week after marking the texts, participants were invited to conduct a stimulated recall task via the online platform Tencent Meeting. Using screen sharing, the first author displayed the essays the teacher had marked and asked open-ended questions about their thoughts when they gave students specific written feedback. Open-ended questions were adopted to avoid leading the teachers' responses and to collect as rich data as possible. For example, one teacher was asked, "Why didn't you give the student the correct answer for this error?" and "You respond to this error with a correct answer. What are your considerations?" Mandarin, the participants' L1, was used to encourage them to express their opinions comfortably and thoroughly. Each task lasted about 30 minutes and was audio-recorded.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

After the stimulated recall tasks, the participants participated in a semi-structured interview in the same video conference session. The guiding questions in the interview protocol were adapted from Cheng et al. (2021) and Mao and Crosthwaite (2019; see Appendix). The interview first focused on questions related to participants' backgrounds, such as their highest academic degree and teaching experience. Then, the interview elicited their beliefs concerning feedback strategy, scope, and focus. Later, questions about individual and contextual factors

affecting their perceptions, such as past learning experience, student English proficiency levels, and teacher workload, were asked to determine the factors shaping the teachers' feedback beliefs. Each interview session lasted about 40 minutes, and Mandarin was used as the medium of communication.

### *Data Analysis*

Stimulated recall and interview data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English before further analysis. The transcribed data was imported to NVivo software for coding. Referring to the analytical framework from Cheng et al. (2021), the first author divided teachers' responses in the stimulated recall tasks into three feedback categories (i.e., feedback strategy, scope, and focus). Under each category, the analysis involved identifying units of feedback provided by the teachers (e.g., teachers' elaboration of the reason behind their specific feedback practice). For instance, under the category of the theme "beliefs about feedback strategy," teachers' comments about not providing direct reformulation were coded under the sub-theme of "indirect feedback for facilitating reflection."

The interview analysis adopted an inductive approach, focusing on teachers' general preferences for different feedback types and the influencing factors. More specifically, teachers' responses to feedback preference questions, such as, "Do you think teachers should provide feedback comprehensively or selectively? Why?" were coded to understand their preferences for feedback types and the reasons behind them. Codes about teachers' preferences were organized under Cheng et al.'s (2021) three feedback categories, while the influencing factors were organized into individual and contextual dimensions. Later, the codes were shared with and confirmed by the participants for member checking to avoid misinterpreting at the end of the coding process (Koelsch, 2013).

## Ethical Considerations

The teachers' consent was gained before the data collection procedure. The teachers were informed of the research aim and procedures with an information sheet. They were also told that the research activity would accommodate their regular teaching practice at school, and their performances during the research would not be reported to their supervisors. The collected data was solely used for research purposes, and anonymous names were used in the research report to keep the participants' personal information confidential.

Informed consent procedures were not followed for using the texts produced by students because the writing samples were used as secondary data, and only the teachers' feedback was analyzed. While the teachers marked the texts with students' names on the paper, they removed the names from the texts when submitting them as writing samples. The first author typed up the handwritten texts to use as examples in this article.

## Findings

The findings are presented in relation to teachers' responses to the analytical categories of feedback: feedback strategy, scope, and focus. Under each category, sub-themes are presented in line with the teachers' feedback beliefs and practices accounting for their feedback type choices.

### Beliefs About Feedback Strategy

#### *Direct Feedback for Untreatable Errors and Linguistic Diversity*

All teachers mentioned in the stimulated recall tasks that they would give the correct answers or solutions if they assumed that students could not correct errors by themselves (i.e., untreatable errors). For instance, when discussing the excerpt in Figure 1, Talia recalled her experience when marking the student's essay and noted:

其实他从句，又套了一个条件状语从句，他纯粹就去套，也没有考虑到这个语义上去的连贯性。所以就有点怪，感觉怪怪的啊。所以给他改了一下，他自己可能根本没读顺过这句。[Talia: This sentence contains an adverbial clause of condition, but the student didn't notice that the sentence was awkward when he wrote it. Thus, I gave him the answer.]

Figure 1

*Talia's Feedback*

And it tells me ^ if we ~~can~~ never give up.  
success will come to you in the end.

Talia's feedback here indicates that she believes errors related to advanced grammar rules, such as conditionals, warrant more direct feedback. Nancy also shared a similar belief that direct feedback was appropriate for errors that exceeded students' current English levels, as she expressed her opinion regarding Figure 2:

因为他前面写的是对的，然后这里暂时表达错了，然后我觉得他可能是记混了，然后我就给他就这里。我觉得如果单纯给他划条线的话，他可能就不懂，所以要给他指出来。[Nancy: The student used the collocation "help the people in need" correctly in the previous sentence but misused it here. He may get the two expressions confused. I am afraid that he has no idea how to correct it if I only underlined it.]

Figure 2

*Nancy's Feedback*

And I will help them to clean the room and fold  
the clothes if they ^ are in need.

The responses given by Talia and Nancy show that their direct feedback preference is dependent on errors that they perceive to be beyond students' current proficiency levels.

On the other hand, Nina used direct feedback for a different reason. She believed that it would be more effective in guiding students to use diverse expressions and vary expressions in their writing:

这个学生全篇用的都是 will do。那么这里我用 plan to, 我想让他在这个表达将来时的句子上面, 告诉他除了有 will do 之外, 我们还有 plan to, decide to 这样子的句子, 也可以用来表达。[Nina: The student used the "will do" structure throughout the essay. I wanted to inform him that besides "will do," he could also use the collocation "plan to" and "decide to" to talk about plans.]

These responses indicate that the students' proficiency level is a key factor influencing teachers' choices of whether or not to provide students with correct answers.

### *Indirect Feedback for Facilitating Reflection and Saving Time*

During the stimulated recall tasks, all four teachers expressed that they sometimes gave students indirect feedback on what they considered treatable errors, indicating where to improve without providing explicit answers. For instance, Tracy recalled the reason why she only circled the incorrect preposition in the excerpt in Figure 3:

如果是直接写给他的话, 等于是就直接就, 他就不用动脑子了, 直接把它改改过来就好。[Tracy: If I gave him correct answers, the student would make no effort to fix the mistake because he only needed to re-write what I provided.]

Figure 3

*Tracy's Feedback*

So I want to share this book to the children.

Tracy believed that circling incorrect preposition use—provided that students know this indicates incorrect usage—would allow the student to reflect on the correct use. Similarly, Nina said that she would underline or circle errors (as shown in Figure 4) if she believed the errors were treatable according to the student's current English proficiency levels.

Figure 4

*Nina's Feedback*

Third, I will sharing a book named Treasure Island. It's very interesting. I was already read it for many times.

Except for Nancy, the other three participants stated a strong preference for indirect feedback. Tracy even noted that she preferred giving indirect feedback regardless of students' proficiency levels. This finding resonates with the work of Li and He (2017), who found that secondary school English teachers in China showed a more positive view toward indirect feedback. Notably, the two experienced teachers (Talia and Tracy) mentioned that they would take other measures to supplement written corrective feedback, such as individual tutorials or explanations in the classroom:

我的习惯一直是面批面订的, 所以我让他先去订下思考。老师给你发这个东西, 你自己能力是否理解了, 是否能够订证。你订正好, 到时我看他订证的情况怎么样。都对了, 那我想我就不用跟他说什么了, 因为他都懂了嘛, 是吧? 然后订正不对的, 我跟他说你就不, 那应该怎么订正, 这应该怎么样。我是需要给他一个思考的过程, 这是我的作风。[Talia: I prefer individual tutorials. I let students think about how to correct errors before looking at their responses in the individual meeting. If they fail to get the correct answer, I will tell them at that time.]

如果说, 比如说比较多同学会犯的错的话, 我可能就这边先给他打个圈, 然后课上一讲, 对, 圈出来, 课堂上就可以起讲。[Tracy: If many

students make the same mistake, I will only underline it and then explain it in class instead of giving each student the correct answer.]

Such responses indicate that the teachers emphasized the importance of reflection and counted on students' capacity to find the correct answers. Tracy also mentioned that students should take the initiative to ask the teacher if they failed to correct errors by themselves.

Another reason for giving indirect feedback is that it helps teachers increase efficacy, as Talia mentioned in the stimulated recall task:

来不及嘛，这个点点点一下。学生知道我意思，因为毕竟两年教下来也知道我的批改一个习惯这样子。有空时也是会写的，给他一个模板的。[Talia: I just put an ellipsis at the end of the text to remind the student to write a conclusion because I was busy then. The student knew what ellipsis meant. Sometimes, I would give him a template if time allows.]

Talia's response indicates that indirect feedback helps teachers save time by not writing down specific answers to students. It suggests that teachers might choose indirect feedback when they lack sufficient time to provide written feedback.

In sum, EFL teachers adopt direct and indirect feedback for different purposes: Direct feedback is provided for untreatable errors and can increase linguistic diversity, while indirect feedback is intended to facilitate students' reflection in the learning process and can also help teachers save time in marking. It is evident that teachers primarily addressed linguistic issues when discussing feedback strategy, although they sometimes commented on content and organization as well. This may be because students made more mistakes at the linguistic level than in the other two areas.

## Beliefs about Feedback Scope

### *Comprehensive Feedback for Raising Awareness about Errors*

Three of the four teachers firmly believed they should fix all errors. Talia believed that if students failed to notice their mistakes during writing practice, they would repeat the same error on writing exams. She preferred that students lose points in the writing practice than on the exams. She was also afraid, as she stated in the interview, that leaving errors unmarked might make students feel they were performing well:

如果看到你不给他改出来的话，可能这就是他一直的错误，他根本不知道出在什么地方，觉得自己写得很好就不学了。我说那个宁可在我地方扣分也不要其他老师地方扣分。[Talia: If I don't indicate mistakes, they may believe their writings are perfect and no longer study hard. As a result, they will lose points in the exams.]

Talia's response shows that comprehensive feedback can help students notice all errors so they know how to improve their writing. However, the analysis of the teachers' feedback practice showed that they did not address every single error in the texts. They admitted that sometimes they overlooked errors, as shown in these excerpts from the interviews:

句首是应该大写，但是这个改太快了。[Talia: The student should use a capital letter at the beginning of the sentence. I read his text so fast that I didn't notice that mistake.]

有的时候改得比较快，有些细节的地方可能没有看得很仔细，所以在这个情况下，就是可能，太快就过去。[Tracy: Sometimes, I have to mark papers quickly, and I may ignore details.]

The above answers showed that teachers may not notice errors if they mark too fast. However, the participants mentioned that if they had noticed an error, they would have responded to it. They also noted

that they may refrain from adopting comprehensive feedback because of time constraints [see Figure 5 for the excerpt Tracy was explaining]:

如果我有时间的话肯定是全改出来的。但有时候读得快，小错误就可能没看到。大小写这种问题，还是其他问题比较要紧，像时态啊，动词形式啊这种。[Tracy: If I have enough time, I will mark all errors, but sometimes I read the essay so fast that I may miss small errors like capitalization. The words “they” and “there” in the third and fourth lines are examples. Such errors may not be as severe as others, such as wrong verb forms and tense.]

Figure 5

Tracy's Feedback

For volunteering, I plan to go to old people's house. Because old people are lonely. I can sweep the floor, fold the clothes or make some food for them, they will feel happy. And I will visit Ningbo Bang Museum, there are many things there. I like there very much, so I will go there this summer. And I share the book called 《OK? OK.》. It tells twelve common people's life stories. Although it's common, but it still moved me. I love read it. Then I will sweeping the floor and washing the clothes. I think my parents will happy when they hear that.

Tracy's answer illustrates that although she wished to mark all errors in the essay, she sometimes did not notice minor errors, such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, because she did not have enough time to mark the students' texts.

Another reason that prevents teachers from indicating all errors in students' writing is the heavy teaching workload, as Nina noted:

如果有时间的话，还是最好每一个能改出来，我觉得这样对他的帮助是最大的。[Nina: If I don't have much teaching workload, I will indicate all errors because it can optimize feedback benefits.]

Tracy's and Nina's responses illustrate their awareness that time constraints and teaching workload might influence their feedback scope, which echoes Mao and Crosthwaite's (2019) findings that despite teachers' intentions to provide comprehensive feedback, their actual practice can be restricted by contextual factors.

Moreover, some teachers noted that sometimes they did not respond in writing because they provided oral feedback in class for common errors:

学生错误都一样的话，像句子连接啊，我就不给他每篇都点出来了，因为我会课上一讲。然后学生就自己对着看就可以了。[Talía: If many students make the same mistake, such as conjunctions between two sentences, I may not indicate it in every essay but explain it in class. Students can check by themselves.]

这个结构上的话，我发现很多学生有这样的问题。所以我就打算直接在课上讲了。[Tracy: I didn't indicate the structure problem here because I found that many students encountered it. I would explain such a problem in the writing class.]

Such responses show that although both Talía and Tracy believed they should mark every single error, they may have considered consolidating oral and written feedback in their practices to improve efficacy. Nina also said that she sometimes missed indicating problems at the organizational level because of fast marking. Still, she would explain in class that the text structure should include an introduction, a body paragraph, and a conclusion and then ask students to organize their texts themselves.

### *Focused Feedback for Major Errors and Encouragement*

Unlike the other three participants, Nancy preferred to provide focused feedback when marking students' essays:

我是把重点错误改出来。我觉得接受程度，学生不同阶段需要掌握的重点不同，或者是他这个阶段需要的困难，主要困难，主要矛盾。我不一定是把所有的错误都改出来。我不会。[Nancy: I will only mark major errors in students' papers. I think students need to master different knowledge at different stages, so I will help them deal with a specific difficulty at each learning stage.]

Nancy emphasized the importance of dealing with major errors, through which students could learn step by step. For instance, Nancy usually did not mark those awkward but grammatically correct expressions, such as the Chinglish expression “keep a clear brain” (see Figure 6). She said she would not devote much time to these errors as she believed that such errors were due to the students' current English proficiency. In addition, Nancy worried that too much underlining and circling in writing would discourage students. During the stimulated recall task, Nancy elaborated on why she did not point out small errors like “third,” “my mother do,” and “may be” in Figure 6. She had relatively low expectations for this student, so she focused on other more important errors at this stage to encourage him to use more varied expressions to describe plans instead of always using “I will.” Nancy hoped that the student could gain a sense of achievement in writing so that he would not lose interest in learning English. This perspective differs from Talia, who believed that the illusion of achievement might prevent students from achieving higher exam scores.

Figure 6  
*Nancy's Feedback*

Second, I will visit an art museum. There I will see many of the famous paintings. And they can help me to keep a clear brain. third, I will share a book to my friends. And I think books are our staircases. Last but not least, I will help my mom to do some housework because my mother do them everyday so may be she is very tired. 单一

In sum, only one teacher favored marking errors selectively based on their significance. Most teachers believed they should indicate all mistakes to raise students' awareness. However, contextual issues, such as time, workload, and student needs, were mentioned as factors that may influence their actual feedback practice. Like feedback strategy, teachers' attention regarding feedback scope is mainly directed toward linguistic errors, most likely due to the high frequency of such errors in student essays.

### Beliefs about Feedback Focus

#### *Content Followed by Language and Organization*

Two teachers, Talia and Tracy, shared a similar belief regarding the importance of local and global errors:

一般我们写作文的话，可能首先会考虑他要点有没有全，他的内容吧。然后就是他的一些语法上的错误，单词上的错误。嗯，然后最后才是结构。[Tracy: First, students should not go off-topic. Then, I will look at grammar mistakes, such as tense and collocation. Finally, I will check organization, such as conjunctions.]

那我觉得所有的学生，不管程度好快的，首先你不能跑题，不能离题。首先你要抓住这个主题，这个主题不要偏了，偏了就废掉了。然后的话呢，那再考虑语法，语法里面就分为一个呢，那个单词拼写，固定的搭配，是吧，这样子的。那么这些都有了，那再考虑这种篇文章一个连贯性，一个逻辑思维连贯性。[Talia: Before examining the grammar and spelling mistakes, I will first consider whether the student covers all the points. The organization is the last step.]

The responses from Tracy and Talia revealed that they prioritized content over organization and grammar mistakes. They noted that according to the rubrics, students would lose many points in the exams if they failed to write around the topic or cover all the points provided.

In terms of feedback at the linguistic level, it is interesting to note that Talia differentiated errors in basic grammar from those that she called “sophisticated” expressions. She mentioned that students should use such advanced expressions to impress the marker and achieve higher scores after meeting the basic requirements of addressing all points, following grammar rules, and writing in paragraphs. She commented on the excerpt in Figure 7 during the stimulated recall task:

素材是有的，而且的话呢，曾经作为你练过的话题，句子也默写过的，很多人都比他表达得好，那么他的理由就写一个，前面就do housework at home，我觉得这已经有点简单了。[Talia: The student received lots of practice in writing on this topic, but he only wrote one reason here to explain why he would do housework. These sentences were error-free but too simple and needed elaboration].

Figure 7

Talia's Feedback

What's more, I am going to do housework at home. Because I want to help my parents.  
表达也太简单[the expression is too simple]

Talia's comment showed that she hoped the student could use more elaborate expressions instead of writing sentences with basic structures throughout the essay. As Talia mentioned in the interview, she drew wavy lines under good expressions (as in Figure 8), illustrating her standard of what counted as sophisticated expressions:

Figure 8

Talia's Feedback

I will also get such a strong feeling of satisfaction after doing chores. In fact, the earlier you start to do chores, the earlier you will be independent.

Like Talia, Tracy also mentioned during the interview that students should regularly collect and learn what she called “advanced expressions” to improve writing quality. This finding reflects that the teachers also focused on the quality of the target language used by students in their essays.

### Views on Linguistic Errors

The two other teachers, Nina and Nancy, held similar beliefs that errors at the content level were more severe than those at the organization level. Nancy also stated that she considered content as primary in the exam-oriented context. However, Nina and Nancy had different opinions about linguistic errors—Nancy believed that linguistic errors were the least important and emphasized the importance of organization:

结构是比较，第一眼让你判断这篇作文好坏的一个标准。[Nancy: The structure can help me estimate the essay level at first glance.]

Nancy believed that the essay structure would make the first impression on the essay marker, so problems at the organization level should be addressed before linguistic errors. However, during the stimulated recall task, she admitted that she might put aside organizational mistakes by lower proficiency students to resolve other more urgent issues, such as covering all points in the content. Nancy's beliefs may have been affected by her internship experience, as she recalled in the interview:

问一下这个带我的那个老师，他是怎么改的。然后他就跟我说把语法错误找出来，然后就是侧重一下连接，然后就找一些优点就可以。[Nancy: When I was an intern teacher, I asked my mentor how he gave students feedback. He told me to point out grammatical errors, pay attention to conjunctions, and leave some positive comments.]

Unlike Nancy, Nina stated that grammar mistakes should be corrected before errors at the global level are discussed. She mentioned that grammar was rule-governed and students would unarguably lose half a point for each grammar mistake based on the rubrics; however, good

handwriting could compensate for errors at the content and discourse organization levels. In Nina's opinion, exam markers would be very subjective in adding points for students' "good" handwriting because different people may consider different handwriting "good." Nina also believed that written corrective feedback was more effective for linguistic errors compared to other types of errors:

就单批注，帮助也有，比方说语法错误，很显而易见的语法错误，他们会知道。但是比方说更高级的，比方说内容、结构、用词方面，这个就比较少了，作用比较小。[Nina: Written corrective feedback is helpful, especially for those simple and obvious grammar mistakes. However, for those at content and organization levels, it has limited effect.]

Nina's response revealed that the perceived efficacy of written corrective feedback for grammatical errors led her to pay the most attention to grammar when giving feedback. Nina's beliefs about correcting grammar using written corrective feedback may be influenced by her past learning experiences in college:

老师会让我们在课上互评。先找语法错误，就只找语法错误，不管内容只找语法错误，然后你找完语法错误之后，你跟你的同桌相互交换。然后第二遍再改，就是改内容上。[Nina: The teacher sometimes asked us to do peer review activities in the writing class. First, we only helped peers check grammar mistakes. Then, we focused on content.]

Nina's learning experiences in utilizing written corrective feedback to improve writing quality may have shaped her view that this practice should first focus on grammar mistakes before looking into content and organization. During the interview, she mentioned that she had imitated her teachers' method of helping students improve their writing. However, the training she received was for polishing her own writing rather than responding to the writing of middle school students. Therefore, she adjusted the form from peer review to teacher feedback to better suit the students' current English levels.

In sum, the teachers paid the most attention to the content level in writing when providing feedback, considering that content constituted a high proportion in public examinations. However, the participating teachers seemed to have different opinions on the importance of indicating linguistic errors because of their personal experiences.

### Discussion

The present study explored personal and contextual factors affecting teachers' beliefs and practices about feedback. The findings revealed that various factors can lead to differences in teachers' beliefs pertaining to key feedback categories, including feedback strategy, scope, and focus. Such evidence showed that response to writing is a multifaceted and complex process.

#### Beliefs about Feedback Strategy

Regarding feedback strategy, all teachers generally agreed that direct and indirect feedback should be provided for different types of errors—indirect feedback for treatable errors and direct feedback for untreatable ones. Determining which feedback type is chosen seemed to depend on students' proficiency levels, a finding that aligns with Lee (2004), who contended that direct feedback is more suitable for low proficiency levels, while advanced learners can more easily respond to indirect feedback.

Regarding teachers' preferences, three out of the four teachers favored indirect feedback, and one teacher emphasized the importance of adopting two types of feedback in different situations. One teacher believed that indirect feedback could help students at all levels reflect on errors and become independent learners, which is consistent with some teachers' beliefs in previous research (Al-Bakri, 2016). Such beliefs seem to align with Long's (1996) interactional hypothesis, which suggested that interaction with textbooks and peers stimulated by indirect feedback can alert students to correct linguistic input and likely prevent them from repeating the same errors in the future. Additionally, by

refraining from providing the correct form, teachers encourage students to notice the error independently. This approach aims to engage them more actively and critically in making linguistic choices and developing writing strategies.

However, the participating teachers mainly commented on linguistic errors under the feedback strategy category. One reason for not addressing other areas in written feedback may be that the requirements for content and structure are more explicit and straightforward for students, such as providing all necessary information and writing a clear three-paragraph essay. Additionally, students may make similar mistakes at the content and organizational levels, while grammar mistakes can vary greatly. As Talia said, she might not point out similar structural mistakes (e.g., no concluding paragraph) if time was limited, and she would explain common mistakes orally in the tutorial class. Hence, students' individual grammar mistakes may catch more attention in teacher-written feedback.

The results of the current study differ from those of Norouzian's (2015) study in which the more experienced teachers preferred to mark errors directly. One possible reason for this might be that the teachers in the current study reported typically providing students with oral feedback in the classroom or during individual meetings after giving written corrective feedback. In this way, indirect feedback was supposed to encourage students to actively reflect on errors before receiving the teacher's oral feedback. The extant research has found that such a feedback practice combining oral and written feedback is effective for student learning. For example, Steen-Utheim and Hopfenbeck (2019) found that written feedback was more effective when combined with oral meta-linguistic explanations or oral interactions with peers. The combination of oral and written feedback can also meet students' needs to follow up on the written feedback with teachers for clarification and decrease misunderstandings or inaccuracy of the students' revision (Kartchava et al., 2021; Steen-Utheim & Hopfenbeck, 2019).

## Beliefs about Feedback Scope

In terms of feedback scope, three teachers believed that they should mark errors thoroughly to raise students' awareness of the mistakes. This echoes Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis that corrective feedback can make students notice the gap so that they can be more clear about how to improve. This finding also aligns with Lee (2004) and Cheng et al. (2021), who found that most teachers in their studies preferred marking errors thoroughly. Although the teachers showed a favorable attitude toward comprehensive feedback, the analysis of their actual feedback revealed that they sometimes left minor errors unmarked. The teachers reported that their choice of errors to correct was sometimes affected by contextual factors, such as time constraints and heavy workload, and they confirmed that, if possible, they would mark all errors. These findings resonate with Van Beuningen (2010) in that a heavy workload may prevent teachers from always providing detailed feedback.

Only one teacher, Nancy, tended to mark errors selectively, focusing on major errors in the essay. This finding is partly consistent with Guénette and Lyster (2013), who found that most of the participants—pre-service English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in Canada—adopted selective corrections according to the importance of errors and the students' proficiency levels. Guénette and Lyster (2013) also emphasized the importance of providing teachers with specialized training on feedback provision, helping them to understand when and how to give feedback to optimize its impact on student learning outcomes.

However, the current study's participants lacked training and guidance on feedback provision. Unsurprisingly, similar to Lee's (2008) discovery, none of the four teachers had ever received professional training or official guidance in giving feedback. Thus, most of the teachers followed the traditional path of giving feedback: Marking all errors. Although we did not explore the effectiveness of teachers' feedback practice on student learning outcomes, our findings highlighted the impact of teacher training on their beliefs and practices about feedback, as

well as their strong desire for training on feedback provision. Such findings highlight the importance of supporting teachers with professional development opportunities (Reinders & Mohebbi, 2018). Similar to the previous section, teachers focused more on linguistic errors, which were the most common errors made by students in this study, resulting in fewer discussions about content and organization.

### Beliefs about Feedback Focus

The teachers discussed their beliefs about feedback focus with respect to the language, content, or organization levels. Two teachers (Talia and Tracy) shared the same view that feedback should first respond to errors at the content level before addressing those at the linguistic and organization levels. This finding differs from previous research that shows that teachers focus more on linguistic accuracy (Niu et al., 2021; Saliu-Abdulahi et al., 2017) or organization errors (Golpour et al., 2020). A possible explanation for this difference may be the exam-oriented context of the current study, where students' primary goal is to achieve the highest exam scores possible. As such, teachers provide feedback according to the priority set by the rubrics. This is consistent with Lee (2009), who found that teachers' practices are affected by the exam culture in their schools where feedback is mainly used to prepare students for public exams.

The other two teachers (Nancy and Nina) held different beliefs on the importance of correcting linguistic errors: Nina believed that linguistic accuracy was of primary consideration, and Nancy stated that content should be followed by organization, and language was the least important. These differences between the two teachers are perhaps shaped by their past learning and teaching experience, which is consistent with Martínez Agudo (2014), who found that student teachers' beliefs about corrective feedback are strongly influenced by their past experiences as L2 learners in the classroom and intern teachers during practicum. These findings also support Aslan (2015), who found that

past language learning experiences could affect teachers' current teaching philosophies and classroom practices.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to our understanding of EFL teachers' beliefs and practices of feedback and how they are affected by personal (i.e., teaching experience and previous learning experience) and contextual factors (i.e., time constraints, teaching workload, and student proficiency levels). While the perspectives of only four EFL teachers from a middle school in China prevent us from generalizing this study's results, examining what these teachers believe and do regarding feedback reveals important insights about their teacher cognition and their response to student writing. Teachers' responses to writing could be influenced by a range of other factors, including but not limited to the writing task and instructions (Min, 2016), school policy (Alshahrani & Storch, 2014; Lee, 2008), cultural influence (Wei & Cao, 2020), digital learning (Prilop et al., 2020), and teachers' self-efficacy (Schütze et al., 2017).

While the current study only explored how these EFL teachers responded to intermediate-level students, future studies should examine whether different language proficiency levels affect teachers' written feedback practices. Moreover, this study revealed that the teachers usually combined different feedback types, regardless of the medium (written/oral) or student number (one-to-one/one-to-many), in response to L2 writing. Instead of focusing on a specific feedback type, teachers' beliefs about and practices of the combination of different types of feedback should be investigated in future research. Additionally, with the emergence of educational technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), research on teachers' perceptions and utilizations of AI-generated feedback is needed to enhance our understanding of feedback beliefs and practices.

The findings can also guide classroom practice and teacher professional development. Considering that contextual factors (e.g., time constraints and teaching workload) could divert teachers' actual classroom practice from their original beliefs, L2 teachers are encouraged to reflect on their feedback beliefs and practice from two aspects: first, how they provide feedback, and second, how students respond to their feedback (Yu, 2021). The current study supports the importance of the first aspect. Teachers can reflect on the relationship between beliefs and practice to better understand their beliefs and how they can guide their L2 writing instruction (Casanave, 2004).

Additionally, since time limits often constrain teachers' feedback practices, teachers can try online marking and feedback tools (e.g., GradeMark within Turnitin) to save time in marking and balance different teaching activities more efficiently (Buckley & Cowap, 2013). A Microsoft Word document alone could also be useful for storing frequent feedback comments when providing comments through learning management systems (e.g., Canvas; Vercellotti, 2021). Furthermore, teachers are advised to use audio and written feedback to provide more thorough feedback across the writing (Cavanaugh & Song, 2021). While these digital practices may be more common in tertiary education contexts, primary and secondary teachers can explore using feedback tools to reduce workload and provide feedback more efficiently.

Regarding teacher professional development, all participants in the current study reported a lack of training in feedback provision and a strong willingness to learn more in this aspect, highlighting the urgent need to offer more training and guidance in teachers' professional development (Lee, 2013). The training courses could focus on research-informed feedback practices. For instance, Bitchener et al. (2005) recommended combining direct written feedback with direct oral feedback, especially for more treatable and grammatical errors. With more training, teachers can be better prepared for classroom realities and maximize the positive effectiveness of feedback on student learning

outcomes. For in-service teachers, schools can organize workshops about giving and receiving feedback, covering topics such as teacher feedback, student involvement, and communication strategies, to develop in-service teachers' skills and positive feelings toward feedback.

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## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview Guideline

(adapted from Cheng et al., 2021; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019)

#### Section 1: Teachers' personal background information

1. Could you please tell me what degree you hold? And in which major?
2. Could you please tell me your experience of learning English writing? Particularly, how your teachers give feedback on your writings?
3. Please tell me your experience of teaching English, especially teaching English writing?
4. Is your teaching of English writing and giving feedback similar or different from your teachers?
5. Have you ever received any trainings on how to teach English writing and give feedback? If yes, has your previous training given you any idea about how to provide feedback on student writing?

#### Section 2: Teachers' specific beliefs on written feedback

6. In your opinion, is it important for teachers to provide feedback on students' writings? Why?
7. How do you perceive the effectiveness of written feedback on student progress?
8. Do you think teachers should provide feedback comprehensively or selectively? Why?
9. In your opinion, what areas should teachers focus on in their written feedback? Why?
10. Do you think that teachers should indicate errors in students' writings? Why?
11. Do you think teachers should present feedback directly or indirectly? Why?
12. Could you please tell me your ideal way to provide feedback on students' writings?

#### Section 3: Other factors influencing teachers' beliefs

13. Do you think students' proficiency levels will affect your feedback practice?
14. Do you think that your students understand the marking code system?
15. Do you ask your students about their preferences with regard to how much and which type of feedback should be given?
16. Is there any school policy regarding the provision of feedback? If not, how would you give WCF?
17. Do you think teaching workload can affect your feedback practice?
18. Can you think of other factors that may influence your feedback practice?
19. Do you have any comments/recommendations/problems concerning feedback provision?