Investigating teachers and students' perceptions of written corrective feedback in the context of tertiary education in Oman

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Abstract

This paper focuses on written corrective feedback in the testing context of the English language foundation program at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. In more detail, in response to the encountered testing problem that involves variability in written corrective feedback and, as a consequence, inconsistent evidence of student position in relation to their improvement in writing and ways to achieve it, the authors discuss the ways teachers respond to students' writing, the type of feedback they deliver, and the strategies they adopt to provide their feedback. The reported study uses mixed methods research methodology, and is grounded on the understanding of giving feedback to students as a social action that is implemented in specific cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts with a purpose to accomplish educational and social goals. The participants of the study are foundation program students and English language teachers representing the multicultural teaching community of the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. The results of the study reveal that written corrective feedback is by no means unanimous among all students and teachers. Diversity in the teachers' background yields a corresponding diversity in the way it is perceived, provided, and interpreted. Undoubtedly, teachers' ultimate goal, in any context, is to help students improve their writing skills in all respects, be it in form, content, or organization. Yet, its effectiveness in improving students' writing remains inconclusive.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, perceptions, preferences, direct, indirect, focused, unfocused

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1   INTRODUCTION

Teacher written response to students' linguistic errors in the writing of a text is crucial for students' development (Al Ajmi, 2015; Bitchener & Storch, 2016). The fact, that written corrective feedback (WCF) involves responses from teachers, accounts for a great deal of variability in the way it is perceived, provided and interpreted as it is shaped by the respondents' previous experiences, preferences, and by certain cultural and institutional practices (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Undoubtedly, the respondents' ultimate goal, in any context, is to help students improve their writing skills in all respects, be it in form (lexis, morphology and syntax), content, or organization. Yet, its efficiency to improve students' writing remains inconclusive, and the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, similar to many other language education institutions, where feedback and the way it is delivered is by no means unanimous among all the teachers, is no exception.

The Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University implements an outcome-oriented general foundation program which is built on skills and competences that students should develop by its end. The foundation English language courses for the university's students are offered in six levels which are perceived as components of a learning continuum that emphasizes recycling and reinforcement of skills throughout the learning process, after which successful students are admitted in different colleges according to their majors. General English courses are taught in levels 1 to 4, while in the two higher levels, 5 and 6, instruction is geared towards students' special fields with more focus on English for Specific Purposes.

Accordingly, the instruction of the writing skill component of the foundation English language courses follows the writing process approach, progressively moving from sentence level writing tasks and assignments to producing a five-paragraph essay. In addition, and conforming to the recommendations of Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), report writing has been introduced in level 6 foundation English language courses for both science and humanities' students. These courses include, inter alia, writing about one rhetorical function over the 15/16 week-long semester: comparison and contrast. Students have instructions on this rhetorical function over six weeks during which there is essay drafting practice as per the writing process approach. By the end of week 6, students are supposed to have produced about 5 drafts of 3 essays: Practice task (essay) 1 = 2 drafts, Practice Task (essay) 2 = 2 drafts, and mid-semester exam. During the drafting process, students receive corrective feedback of different types from their teachers on their work and general feedback on their performance in the mid-term exam. Over the remaining 9/10 weeks of the semester, students work on their research projects about topics related to the same rhetorical function. During the project preparation process, both teachers and students are supposed to work closely together giving, receiving and responding to feedback. This process culminates in the students' drafting a 500/700-word report, draft 1, draft 2, and final draft about which students, again, receive corrective feedback of different types and in different forms. The level 6 writing courses provide the researchers with an optimum opportunity to explore the progress of students' writing ability from draft to draft and their long-term gains from their teachers WCF.

The Centre for Preparatory Studies' English language teaching community is represented by both Omani and expatriate faculty members who come from more than 20 countries with their different histories in educational development and practice, and enrich the Centre with their cultural and educational perspectives, experiences and practices. However, the immense

diversity in the teachers' background cannot but yield a corresponding diversity in the ways they respond to students' writing, the type of feedback they deliver, and the strategies they adopt to provide it. For example, a vast array of strategies is used to offer feedback and comments on students' written work in different forms. What are, then, Omani university students' perceptions of WFC? What are their preferences with respect to the type of WCF they would like to receive from their teachers? How much of it do they incorporate in the drafting process to improve their writing ability? How do teachers in the Omani context view WCF? Which type(s) of WCF do they think work(s) best with their students? Do teachers listen to students' voices, i.e. do they consider students' preferences and modify their way(s) of giving feedback? What are the short and long terms effects of teachers' WCF on students' writing in the Omani context? Which are the most effective types and strategies to give WCF on Omani students' written work?

2 THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' feedback on students' work is an important skill and a valuable part of any language program (Tangkiengsirisin & Kalra, 2016). It is considered an essential part of the significant learning process that assists. students' development, fosters their motivation and ensures their linguistic accuracy (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Jui-Jung et al., 2017). Embedded in this is the written corrective feedback (WCF) referred to as a written response to language learner's linguistic errors made in the writing of a text (Bitchener & Storch, 2016).

Feedback to students' writing is a crucial part of the writing process approach. It is 'a social action' that takes place in specific cultural, institutional, and instructional contexts (Bradley, 2017), and is "designed to accomplish educational and social goals" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 10). The fact, that written corrective feedback (WCF) involves responses from teachers, accounts for a great deal of variability in the way it is perceived, provided and interpreted as it is shaped by the respondents' previous experiences, preferences, and by certain cultural and institutional practices (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Undoubtedly, the respondents' ultimate goal, in any context, is to help students improve their writing skills in all respects, be it in form (lexis, morphology and syntax), content, or organization.

Research in WCF, despite being prolific, has not established its efficacy unequivocally and has yielded conflicting results (Aghajanloo et al., 2016). It has so far raised more questions than it has actually answered. The value of the written corrective feedback for EFL learners' writing and grammatical accuracy in different educational settings outside English-speaking countries has been confirmed by multiple studies (Chen et al., 2016; Mehran & Seyyed Hossein, 2014). However, it still remains a serious challenge for many practitioners in different language teaching and learning contexts.

3 METHODS

This study was conducted at the Centre for Preparatory Study (CPS) of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). The aim of the study was to investigate students and teachers' perceptions of WCF and the effects of teachers' preferred type(s) of WCF on the improvement of Omani students' writing, both in the short and the long terms. The study was approved and supported by the Centre's Research Committee. The requested permissions involved the permission to investigate the effectiveness of teachers' feedback on students' multiple writing drafts, distribute a closed-ended questionnaire to writing English foundation program teachers and to students from level 6 courses twice, one at the beginning of the course and the second at the end, and an open-ended questionnaire to participating teachers at the end of the semester. The information received by the study participants included the rationale of the research and its purpose, clear instructions on what to do and how to do it, ethics and participants' rights involving the right to

be kept anonymous, withdraw any time they wish, ask for clarifications and receive a summary of the results. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a written survey to elicit participants' opinions about the effectiveness of the delivered feedback and their preferences justified with their reasons. Such integration is considered to allow for "a more complete and synergistic utilization of data than do separate quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis" ("Agency for Healthcare Research", 2013, p.1).

   Three Likert scale closed-ended written surveys were used to collect the quantitative data. These were three modified versions of the same survey based on Amrheim and Nassaji's (2010). The survey's versions were created on Google Form and shared with the participants online. Two of the three versions were shared with the students; the first one at the beginning of the semester-long course and meant to elicit students' opinions about the feedback they prefer to receive from their writing teachers, while the second was given at the end of the course, and it was meant as a reflection on the feedback they received and how effective they thought it was to improve their writing skills. The third one, however, was administered to the teachers to elicit their opinions about the feedback they delivered to their students and how effective they thought it was to help improve their students' writing skills. Since the three surveys were essentially one but produced in three modified versions, only one of these was piloted with a number of students. The outcome of the piloting was to produce the students' versions in both English and Arabic, the students' mother tongue, to avoid ambiguities.

To gain more in-depth information about why teachers preferred a particular type or amount of feedback, a set of open-ended questions was used to collect the qualitative data. These allowed participants to describe, in their own words, the reasons underlying their preferred feedback choices. Because the number of teacher participants was only six, it was easy to code them and their responses. In the study, teachers were referred to as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, and content analysis was used to deal with their responses.

Participants

This study involved 66 students and 6 English language teachers, all from the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. All student participants were Omanis. They were enrolled in the foundation English language program (FPEL) 0603 course (level 6). The writing component of this course involves a recursive writing process of multiple drafts of a comparison and contrast essay and a 500-700-word-report about a mini research project students conduct on a given topic, and a lot of interaction between the student writers and their teachers in terms of corrective feedback. The student participants were registered in six different sections, three from the Department of English for Sciences and three from the Department of English for Humanities. As for the teacher participants, they were both native and non-native English language educators with vast teaching experience and expertise in the ESL/EFL field. During the orientation meeting, they were briefed of Rod Ellis's (2008) four types of feedback and were asked to select one type to use with their students throughout the semester for a subsequent comparison from (1) direct focused feedback, where a teacher selects few errors and provides direct corrections; (2) direct unfocused feedback, where a teacher provides direct corrections on all errors; (3) indirect focused feedback, where a teacher selects few errors and provides a code (e.g., editing symbols) without providing correct forms and (4) indirect unfocused feedback, where a teacher uses a code to indicate all errors. The request to be assigned a particular type of feedback was not supported by the teacher participants. Actually, they showed some resistance to this idea which they believed to be a constraint that would potentially reduce the possibilities to help their students. On the contrary, they preferred to be left to work at their own convenience, i.e. to use whichever type of feedback they would judge beneficial for their students and would serve their purpose in the best possible ways. After discussion, the two researchers decided that the teachers had a valid point and consented to it.

Analysis

As mentioned above, the surveys were created on Google Form, and a link was sent to the participants by email for them to access them and complete them online. Google Form records responses on a detailed MS EXCEL spreadsheet based on which different types of graphs and charts are generated for all the questions. Upon reviewing the recorded responses and the timestamp on the spreadsheet, the researchers found out that some students had repeated entries, which was obviously reflected in the generated graphs and charts, i.e. the number of responses for each question was higher than the actual number of participants. To rectify this, we had to remove those repeated entries from the source file, and thus new more accurate graphs and charts have been generated. We ended up with 66 respondents. Prior to the data analysis, the original MS EXCEL file generated by Google Form was downloaded and saved. This file was used to code all the items on the surveys and the responses from the 66 participants. The codes we used were mainly of two types with the first consisting of letter symbols (shortened words) that referred to the items on the surveys, while the second was numerical, i.e. each option on the item was assigned a number. Table 1 below shows Question 1 as a coding example.

Table 1 Coding Example

Item	Code
Question 1 **Survey 1** How would you like your teacher to correct your errors on the writing tasks? Check the appropriate box.	**1.Pref. T's WCF1**[*] *(= Question 1 of Survey 1)* [*]*1 at the end refers the 1st survey*
Question 1 **Survey 2** How did your teacher correct your errors on the writing tasks? Check the appropriate box.	**1.Pref. T's WCF2**[*] *(= Question 1 of Survey 2)* [*] *2 at the end refers to the 2nd survey*
Options □ Correct(ed) all errors	**1**
□ Correct(ed) major errors, but not minor ones	**2**
□ Correct(ed) most major errors, but not all	**3**
□ Correct(ed) a few selected errors only	**4**
□ Correct(ed) only errors that affect(ed) communication	**5**
□ No corrections, just comments	**6**

Once coded and saved, the new MS EXCEL file was opened in SPSS, version 23, for data analysis. The collected data were analyzed using the Descriptive Statistics mainly for frequencies, Means, and Modes, Paired Samples T- Tests to compare students' responses on the two surveys for variations, and finally the Independent Samples T- Tests to compare students' responses on the second survey to the teachers'. The data reported in the tables and graphs all through are therefore derived from both SPSS and MS EXCEL.

Wherever there was a need for further clarifications of teachers' attitudes, we consulted their responses to the open-ended questions, i.e. the qualitative data, for deeper insight. As for the students, we did not collect any qualitative data from them because the quantitative data were sufficient for the purposes of our study. Time constraint was another important factor for not collecting qualitative data; we were aware that students had already been overloaded, so we did not want to add to their plates.

FINDINGS

The obtained results were looked at question by question in the same order as they appear on the surveys. First, we looked at the students' responses to the first survey with respect to what WCF and how much of it they prefer to receive from their teachers. Then, we compared these preferences expressed early in the course with their end-of-semester reflections on the WCF they received from their teachers over the whole semester and its effectiveness. To this end, we used SPSS for Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples T-Tests. Finally, since the students' second survey and the teachers' were given at about the same time, towards the end of the semester, both sets of responses are compared using the Independent Samples T- Test in SPSS.

The first question on the survey aimed at eliciting how much corrective feedback students would prefer to receive (Survey 1) and the amount they thought they actually received (Survey 2) from their teachers. The WCF amount options ranged from willing to have all errors corrected to commenting only with no corrections.

Responses to this question carried no surprises at all. As expected, most student participants (n=43, 65,2 %) preferred to have all their mistakes corrected by their teachers. This was quite understandable as students at this stage, and despite being at level 6, are by and large still not confident enough to handle their own errors; therefore, they are usually for more teacher intervention.

About 15 weeks later, and after having produced an average of six writing assignments on which they had feedback, the same number of respondents (n=43, 65.2 %) reported that their teachers had corrected all their mistakes. Table 2 shows that there is no difference between the two surveys; students' preference for the easy way as expressed by the Mode has not changed over the semester. The t-value of -1.569 and the p-value of 1.21 indicate that the difference between the two surveys is statistically insignificant. However, two changes are worth mentioning, albeit being insignificant. First, 10.5 % of the participants have apparently developed some awareness of the importance of communicating ideas in writing over the semester. As a result, that option got more attention in the second survey.

Table 2 Question 1 – Preference of Teachers' WCF

Options	Survey 1		Survey 2		Paired-Samples Test		
	Valid%	Mode	Valid%	Mode	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Correct all errors	65.2		65.2				
Correct major errors, but not minor ones	25.8		15.2				
Correct most major errors, but not all	4.5	Correct all errors	6.1	Correct all errors	-1.569	65	1.21
Correct a few selected errors only	1.5		1.5				
Correct only errors that affect communication	3.0		10.5				
No corrections, just comments	0		1.5				

Second, and unlike the previous case, the option of correcting only major errors was picked up by 10.6 % fewer participants in the second survey than in the first one. This could be attributed to the type of feedback these students received on their drafts. They might have realized that having only the major errors corrected did not help them much.

What is actually surprising in the responses to this question, however, is the teachers being reported to have corrected all errors, a fact confirmed by responses from the teachers

themselves. Just like the first survey, exactly the same number/percentage of students in the second survey, 65.2 %, confirmed that they had had all their errors corrected by their teachers. Four out of the six participating teachers (T1, T2, T4, and T5) selected that same first option, "Correct all errors", while the remaining two (T3 and T6) opted for the second option. Upon comparing the responses of the two groups (students' to teachers'), it is therefore not surprising that the Independent Samples Test returned no statistically significant differences between the two means as reported in Table 3.

Moving to Question 2 on the survey, it aims at probing how much importance the participants attribute to grammar. It is a Likert Scale item with five categories ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree with a neutral position in the middle. The assumption here is that the more importance respondents attribute to grammar, the more they agree with the statements, ensuing a great focus on grammar in the WCF. More than 60% of student participants in both surveys agreed with the stated statements. Both the small t-values and the large p-values indicate that the difference between the two surveys in this instance is statistically insignificant. In other words, the participants maintained the same laud vis a vis grammar over the semester. Similarly, the participating teachers, in their majority, hold the same high opinion about grammar.

Table 3 Students' WCF Preferences Compared to Teachers'

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Differ-ence	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
1.WCFPref. Ss' vs Ts'	Equal variances assumed	2.810	.098	.837	70	.405	.484	.579	-.670	1.640
	Equal variances not assumed			1.779	13.485	.098	.484	.272	-.101	1.071

However, Table 4 below reports statistically significant differences between the students and teachers on two occasions: "Grammar is essential for written communication" with a t- and p-values of -2.652 and .010 respectively, and "Students pay attention to the grammar they know while writing", with a t-value of 3.470 and p- values of .001.

A word of clarification in this regard is due here. The Language Use component (grammar) in the foundation program English language curriculum at the Centre for Preparatory Studies is closely tied up to the writing skill, i.e., we deal only with the grammatical point(s) that are needed to write about the task in hand. From contextual experience, most teachers know that when students are tested on particular points of grammar dealt with and practiced in class, most of them score very high on the different items of the test showing a high understanding of the tested constructs. However, when it comes to writing or speaking, that same high understanding is hardly ever reflected in their performance. Usually, there is a gap, sometimes a substantial one, between what students know in terms of grammar and vocabulary, and what they actually use when performing in writing or speaking. Investigating the reasons for this is left for future research.

Responses to the second question shed more light on those to the first. Now, and in the light of the new input from question 2, we are in a better position to understand clearly why most

students and teachers prefer all errors to be corrected: students think grammar is essential to written communication, and so do their teachers, therefore, it stands to reason that they are both for all-error correction to guarantee accurate clear writing. Questions 1 and 2 are therefore congruent.

This is well supported by the qualitative data. When asked which of Rod Ellis's (2008) four categories best describes their individual WCF style, five (n=5) out of six teachers stated they would use unfocused feedback, usually indirect but occasionally direct feedback depending on how difficult they thought the mistake was. They would generally start with indirect unfocused in the first draft and move gradually towards indirect focused in the subsequent drafts. Following is a typical response from T3:

Table 4 Students' vs Teachers' Opinions About the Importance of Grammar

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Gr. Essential	Equal variances assumed	11.947	.001	-.794	70	.430
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.652	65.000	.010
SS Wr. will improve with > Gr	Equal variances assumed	4.686	.034	-.167	70	.868
	Equal variances not assumed			-.353	13.266	.729
Ss Pay Attention	Equal variances assumed	.033	.855	3.470	70	.001
	Equal variances not assumed			3.129	5.735	.022
Lge Practice more important	Equal variances assumed	.003	.956	.123	70	.902
	Equal variances not assumed			.122	5.918	.907

Indirect unfocused. I would mark a range of error types in the first draft and encourage students to use the error key to make changes for their 2nd draft.

In the 2nd drat I would concentrate on errors common throughout the class with remedial work before 2nd writing task.

Question 3 asked participants to rate seven ways of correcting the same mistake (the form and use of the present perfect) on a scale of 5 categories ranging from Not useful at all to Very useful. It aimed at eliciting both students and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the different types of feedback and their preferences.
To start with students, their responses on both surveys were very similar. A paired-samples Test showed small t- values ranging from .1868 to .7422 and large p-values .250 - .760 indicating that there were no statistically significant differences between responses on the two surveys. While rating the seven marking ways, students took positive attitudes (Useful and Very useful) towards the A-D feedback types, which were: A) Review the Present Perfect, B) Subject-Verb Agreement, C) Wrong Tense, and D) Direct Correction. This positive rating means they regarded these errors important, therefore, their correction would be effective to improve their writing. In contrast, E-G feedback types, E) Cross out, F) Wrong Auxiliary, and G) Underlining, received negative ratings.

According to Ellis's (2008) feedback categorization, A, B, and C are indirect feedback, where the instructor points out the error using a code without giving the direct correction. The D-marking way, however, is a direct feedback where the instructor highlights the error and gives the correct form directly. A likely reason why students rated both the direct and the indirect feedback positively could be that the used codes were clear enough to them and required no further clarifications. Teachers' rating of these types of feedback was not any different; it matched that of the students to great extent. Teachers' positive rating means that they believe that correcting these errors will help students improve their writing skills, which is reflected in

their responses to an open-ended question about what they focus on in their WCF:

I focus on everything related to writing in the first draft; later on I become more alert with organization and content (T1).

All of these (content, organization, vocabulary, or grammar). For first drafts, I focus exclusively on content on organization. I deal with grammar and vocabulary in subsequent drafts (T2).

Organization/Vocab/Grammar. Content is dictated by the texts being used (T3).

I prefer to divide components into content, organization first, then vocabulary and grammar. As they need to focus on two things at a time (T4).

I focus on all of these. which one I focus on at a singular time depends on the draft (T5).

First I focus on content to understand what they mean, then organization, vocabulary and grammar (T6).

Coming to Question 4 on the survey, it asked participants to rank the following six errors: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, content, organization, and punctuation in order of importance to them, with No 1 as the most important and No 6 the least important. The descriptive statistics reported in Table 5 hereafter shows the same ranking in the two surveys except for vocabulary and spelling in the first round.
However, when we add up the means from the two occasions and divide the total by two, we find spelling in the second position while vocabulary occupies the third one. The smaller the mean is the higher rank we have:
VOC1 + VOC2 / 2 =
3.38 + 3.42 = 6.20/2 = 3.40
SP1 + SP2 /2 =
3.20 + 3.36 = 6.56/2 = 3.28
3.28 < 3.40 therefore SP 2nd, VOC 3rd.

This said, Paired Samples Test nonetheless found no statistically significant differences in the ranking in the two surveys with t-values ranging from -.951 to 1.300 while the p-values went up from .198 to .862.

Comparing students' ranking of errors to that by teachers, however, is where significant differences are reported. According to the descriptive statistics in Table 5, teachers ranked four errors out of six differently from students. These differences are depicted clearly by the Independent Samples Test summarized in Table 6. The Levene's Test for Equality of Variances soon informs us that there is significant variability in the ranking by the two groups, although this could be attributed to the teachers' sample small size. Further right in the table, we read small p-values that range from .000 to .001 except for VOC, which confirms that there are statistically significant differences between the ranking Means of the two groups, and that these differences are real, not accidental, except for VOC which was placed in the third position by the two groups.

Table 5 Error Ranking

| Q 4 Students' Surveys 1&2				Teachers' Survey			
	Mean	Mode	Order		Mean	Mode	Order
4.GR1	2.12	1.00		*4.GR*	3.67	4.00	4th
4.GR2	2.27	1.00	1st	*4.VOC*	3.33	3.00	3rd
4.VOC1	**3.38**	**3.00**		*4.SP*	5.33	5.00	5th
4.VOC2	3.42	2.00	3rd	*4.CONT*	1.17	1.00	1st
4.SP1	**3.20**	**2.00**		*4.ORG*	1.83	2.00	2nd
4.SP2	3.36	3.00	2nd	*4.PUNC*	5.67	6.00	6th
4.CONT1	3.35	4.00					
4.CONT2	3.62	4.00	4th				
4.ORG1	4.05	5.00					
4.ORG2	3.80	5.00	5th				
4.PUNC1	4.91	6.00					
4.PUNC2	4.52	6.00	6th				

The differences between the students' and the teachers' ranking comes from how much importance teachers attribute to each of the writing components, which in its turn, informs on their focal priorities. Looking back at the quotes from the six teachers above, we see that four of them prioritize content and organization and push grammar and vocabulary to subsequent drafts. Only one teacher starts the other way around, and only one teacher states that his or her focus depends on the draft. Thus, it stands to reason that content and organization are ranked first and second respectively by teachers, which puts them in stark contrast to students, who put grammar and vocabulary in the first two positions.

The fifth question asked participants to opine on the feedback they receive(d), or in case of teachers, they deliver to their students in terms of its effectiveness. Just like question 3, they were asked to rate it on a continuum ranging from "Of no use at all" to "Very useful". Nowhere in the analyses of the students' two surveys was there any statistically significant difference indicating that the responses were similar across the board. The Mean, the Mode, and the small sample variance highlighted in Table 6 altogether show clearly that almost all respondents chose the fourth option, which was "Useful".

Table 6 Effectiveness of the Feedback

	5. Usefulness of the WCF - SS1	*5. Usefulness of the WCF - SS2*	*5. Usefulness of the WCF - TS*
Mean	**3.47**	**3.36**	**3.67**
Standard Error	0.08	0.09	0.21
Median	4.00	3.50	4.00
Mode	**4.00**	**4.00**	**4.00**
Standard Deviation	0.66	0.76	0.52
Sample Variance	**0.44**	**0.57**	**0.27**
Count	66.00	66.00	6.00

Next is question 6. It is about what action is taken when the feedback is not well understood. Again, students' responses in the two surveys are quite similar with a t- test value of 1.991 and a p. value of 0.51.
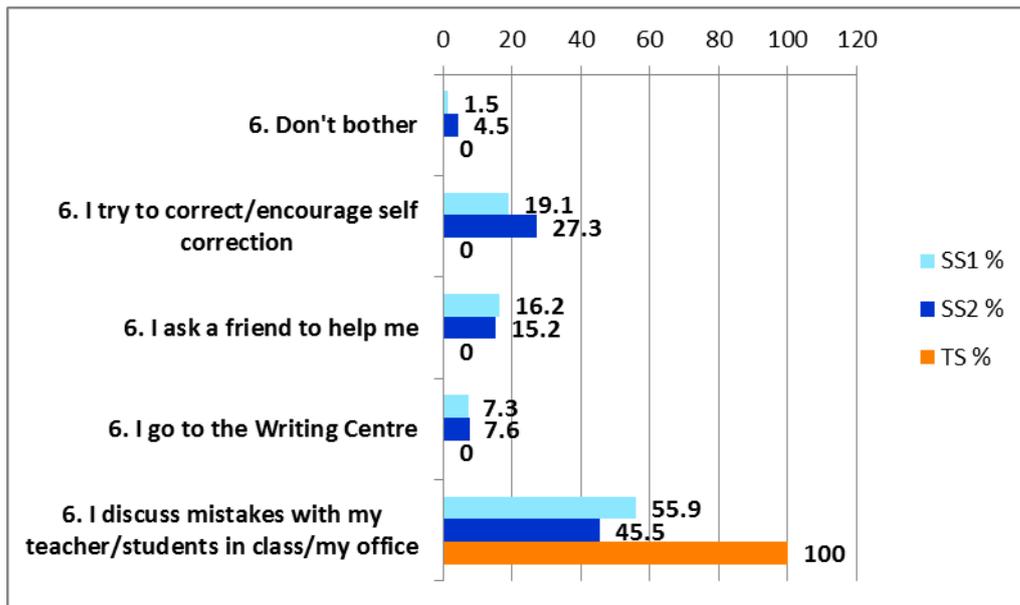
Figure 1 Action in the event of confusing WCF

A careful look at Fig. 1 above enables us to understand the reason for the almost, yet not significant p-value: there are quite big differences between the students' two longest bars on the bar chart. In SS1, 55.9 % said they would discuss their mistakes with their teacher, while the same option dropped to 45.5 % in SS2. The second difference is related to those who try to correct their mistakes themselves, which rose from 19.1 % in SS1 to 27.30 % in SS2. The major difference, however, is between the students' responses and the teachers', who have all chosen one option: "Discuss students' mistakes in class, or in my office." Obviously, the Independent Samples Test returned statistically significant differences with a p-value of .003.

Moving to question 7, it asked participants to indicate how much of their teachers' feedback they use on a continuum that runs over four categories "I never use it", "I use only the few corrections I understand", "I use most of it", and "I use it all". With the exception of 3%, who responded with the first option in the second survey, all participants, teachers included, responded with the second, third and fourth options, with the vast majority in the third option. The differences between students' responses in the two surveys were minimal with a t- and p-values of 1.118 and .267 respectively. Thus, there was no statistically significant differences either intra or inter groups.

Coming to question 8, it echoes the first question in terms of the amount of feedback preferred except that this time the preference is limited to the event when there are too many mistakes. It aims at probing whether reddening scripts scares learners or puts them off, i.e., discourages them. Again, students' responses on the two occasions were very close as shown in Fig.3. Most participants preferred the teacher to correct all their mistakes even if there were too many. The Paired Samples Test returned no statistically significant differences, with a t- and a p-values of -.784 and .436 respectively. Teachers' responses in their turn were equally divided between two options, 50 % responded with preferring to correct all mistakes and 50 % opted for correcting only the major ones. No significant differences are reported by the Independent Samples Test (t: .300, p.: .765).
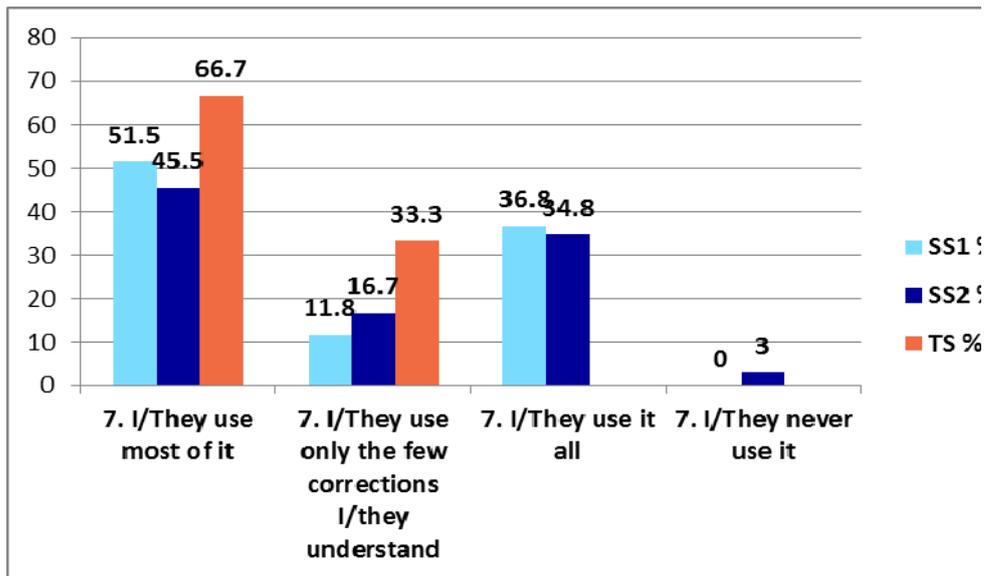
Figure 2 How much of the WCF is used

   It is worth mentioning here that the two groups' responses to questions 1 and 8 are quite similar. In the three surveys, most participants prefer teachers to correct all mistakes although teachers' last responses in this respect dropped slightly to 50 %. This insistence could be a clear indication that despite the great efforts of the CPS to promote autonomous learning, and despite the enhanced use of technology tools to encourage independent learning, students still depend quite heavily on their instructors.

Likewise, teachers insist on willing to mark all errors even if there are too many. To reiterate what was said earlier in question 1, this is quite surprising on the teachers' part because, by now, they should wean off students and refrain spoon-feeding them so that they learn to "catch the fish" themselves instead of having it given to them easily. The following reasons are gleaned from teachers' responses to the open-ended questions:

   Students' English level does not allow them to handle their own mistakes

   While self or peer correcting, students make more/new mistakes, which makes the process a
     vicious circle

   This 'vicious-circle process' results in a big number of drafts for which there is not enough time

   As such, it becomes tedious and time consuming for teachers and boring for students
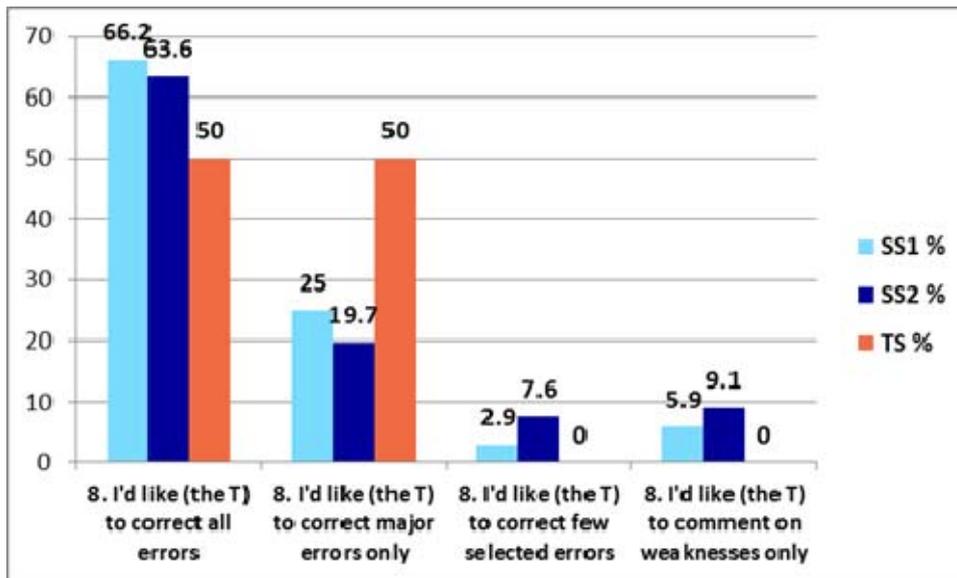
Figure 3 Amount of WCF when there are too many errors

The last two questions, 9 and 10, ask the participants whether they prefer grammar and vocabulary (9), content and organization (10) errors to be corrected on all drafts, the first, the second, or on the final draft. Their purpose is find out how much assistance is preferred and if this dependency subsides over the semester as they advance in the course. As with questions 1 and 8, the vast majority of both groups (students and teachers) preferred mistakes to be corrected on all drafts as shown in Fig.6 below. Again, the "spoon-feeding" preferences and practices unfortunately appear to be very difficult to cut down on. Neither the Pair nor the Independent Samples Tests reported any statistically significant differences within or between the groups.

According to student participants, Omani foundation program students welcome any WCF which they regard as effective support. This result corroborates previous findings that EFL students value teachers' feedback on their writing and perceive it positively (Tangkiengsirisin & Kalra, 2016). As for the teacher participants, they believe that EFL teachers at tertiary level in Oman should provide as much WCF as they can. This study confirms the fact that teachers are, by and large, always ready to go the extra mile for their students. They prefer to correct all their students' errors on all the drafts. Although good faith and dedication to the students on the part of the teachers are very positive and highly appreciated attitudes, we find delivering unfocused feedback continuously throughout the whole writing process quite counterproductive as it is against the general operating approach adopted at CPS, against the pedagogy of the writing process itself as well as the natural course of things in the educational progress. Our view is based on the following:

First, the CPS has embraced the student-centered approach and has long been promoting autonomous learning, which reduces a teacher's intervention to its minimum and, conversely, expands students' space to its maximum entailing little space, if any at all, for teachers' marking all errors. Second, the recursive nature of writing and the writing process involves a lot of drafting that culminates in producing a refined piece of writing at the end of the process. If done properly, the multiple draft process that students go through helps them improve their writing skills. It follows therefore to say that, from a pedagogical perspective, marking all errors for students literally means to nib the writing process at its bud since the sought refined final product, which is supposed to be the result of students' repeated trials, is just given right after the first draft, hence bringing the long process to an abrupt end so soon, depriving students from

much learning that could result from searching, finding and discovering things for themselves. Last, the more learners advance in their studies, the less they depend on their teachers and the more autonomous they become. The participating students in this study are all in level 6, the last stage of the English foundation program, which means that by now, they are assumed to have been weaned off the "spoon-feeding" way of learning and have learned a great deal about catching the fish themselves instead of waiting for it to be given to them, i.e. becoming autonomous learners.

4 DISCUSSION

The results of the study by Aghajanloo et al. (2016) have a clear implication that unfocused direct WCF should be emphasized as an essential tool for developing EFL language learners' writing ability. Mekala and Ponmani (2017) also assert that giving direct written corrective feedback enhances learners' proficiency in writing. However, it appears that most teacher participants in the context of the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman are comfortable with the indirect unfocused type of feedback. This is because it allows ample leeway for maneuvering the focus of their WCF, i.e. steer their focus towards areas in need of more attention. Indirect unfocused feedback also makes it possible for "… students to reflect on every aspect of their product and not only on one type of mistakes at a time … and it encourages them to reflect on their mistakes and to become aware of them" (T1). This WCF type is potentially rewarding in the long run as it puts learners on the right track of autonomous learning. To illustrate, we have learnt from the analysis of the results that students in the context of the foundation program prefer to receive as much feedback as possible from their teachers during all the stages of the process of writing. This means that they are for unfocused WCF. Yet, they did not show any particular proclivity for direct or indirect WCF. We are inclined to believe that they are ready to take in indirect feedback provided that the used codes are clear enough for them. Nevertheless, this bright side also has its downside. As such, students depend heavily on teachers to hone their skills, which is not advised in a student-centered and autonomous-learning oriented context. This implies that despite the efforts put to promote autonomous learning at CPS, our students still have their eyes fixed on their teachers for whatever they need in their studies. Here comes the crucial role of the teachers. It is strongly advised that teachers wean off students gradually by tapering their intervention, ceding more and more space to them, and encouraging them to find their own ways. Also, students' responses indicate that the teacher is still seen as "a sage on the stage" and the main source of information. Students strongly believe their teachers' WCF, no matter whether it is direct or indirect, focused or unfocused, is always effective to them, which explains their preference for all-error corrections on all drafts. This is most probably due to the lack of self-confidence inherited from the schooldays. This implies that unlearning fossilized bad learning habits is no easy task at all. Rather, it is a long tedious task that often takes longer than those same habits took to learn. Therefore, we, at CPS, still have much to do to help our students first to unlearn those bad learning habits they come to us with, and second to build up in them enough self-confidence required to start thinking for themselves and making their own choices and decisions.

On another note, this is a contextual study; any extrapolations of its findings should consider context-related differences. This said, the study also has its limitations, which, again, involve careful thinking about whether it should be replicated, or its results should be extrapolated. First, the teachers' sample size (n=6) is drastically smaller than that of the students (n=66). This caused the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in the Independent Samples Test to report significant values for some of the compared pairs. Second, the researchers did not consider collecting qualitative data from the students as we did not need them for our purposes. Obviously, they may prove to be of some use in other contexts. Third, two areas have not been touched upon, as they are outside the scope of this study: one is to explore the reasons for the

substantial gaps between students' linguistic knowledge and the actual application of that same knowledge in their writing and speaking performance, while the second is to verify the effectiveness of the teachers' WCF and how much it helps students improve. These could be picked up by future research.

5 CONCLUSION

This mixed-method study investigated students' and teachers' perceptions and preferences of the written corrective feedback in the context of tertiary education in Oman. Findings indicate that perceptions and preferences of the two groups are by and large very similar. Test users would like to receive as much WCF as possible. They believe in the effectiveness of WCF and show no proclivity towards any particular type of feedback. As for teachers, they are willing and ready to give students what they need as they also believe in its effectiveness. Nonetheless, teachers express their preference for the indirect unfocused type, where a teacher points out all the errors, assigns codes but does not give direct corrections. Although this is helpful and effective in the short run, excessive unfocused WCF, whether direct or indirect, is not recommended in the long run as it delays the process of autonomous learning.

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7 APPENDIX A

STUDENT CONSENT FORM **Researcher: Please complete Sections A & D ONLY**	استمارة طالب للموافقة على المشاركة في بحث علمي الطالب: الرجاء إكمال الأجزاء (ب) و (ج) و (د) فقط

A **Full title of the research project:** أ

Teachers and Students' Perceptions of the Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

B ب

Tick (✓) as appropriate. اشر بإشارة (√) كما يناسب.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	**No**	**Yes**	أؤكد أنني قد قرأت وفهمت ورقة المعلومات المعدة للبحث أعلاه وتمت إتاحة الفرصة الكاملة لي لطرح الأسئلة. **لا** **نعم**
I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I can withdraw at any time, without having to give reasons for my withdrawal.	**No**	**Yes**	أعي بأن مشاركتي في البحث اختيارية وأنه يمكنني الإنسحاب في أي وقت بعد إعلام الباحث بذلك بدون الحاجة الى إعطاء أي تفسير. **لا** **نعم**
I understand that anonymized quotes of any data I provide for this research project may be used in future publications.	**No**	**Yes**	أعي أن البيانات التي سأدلي بها في هذا البحث ستستخدم لأغراض النشر العلمي شريطة الحفاظ على السرية التامة. **لا** **نعم**
I understand that if I participate/do not participate in the research project that my marks will **NOT** be affected in any way.	**No**	**Yes**	أعي أن مشاركتي أو عدم مشاركتي في البحث لن تؤثر البتة على علاماتي الدراسية بالجامعة أو المركز سلبا كان أم ايجابا. **لا** **نعم**
I agree to take part in the research study.	**No**	**Yes**	أقر موافقتي على المشاركة في هذا البحث العلمي. **لا** **نعم**

C **Audio recording of interviews or focus groups** الموافقة على التسجيل الصوتي للمقابلة ج

I agree to the interview or focus group being audio recorded.	**No**	**Yes**	أقر بالموافقة على التسجيل الصوتي لمقابلة البحث (فردية أم جماعية حسب طبيعة الطلب الموضح في ورقة المعلومات). **لا** **نعم**

_____   _____

D Name of Participant   اسم المشارك   Date   التاريخ   Signature   التوقيع د

Dr. Farah Bahrouni
_____   _____
Name of Researcher   اسم الباحث   Date   التاريخ   Signature   التوقيع

Appendix B

<div align="center">

Centre for Preparatory Studies
The Research and Conference Committee

</div>

TEACHER CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Please complete sections A & C ONLY   Participant: Please complete sections B & C ONLY

A Full title of research project:

Teachers and Students' Perceptions of the Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

Name, position, and contact address of Researcher(s) establishing contact with teachers:

Dr. Farah Bahrouni & Dr. Victoria Tuzlukova
bahrouni@squ.edu.om   99434899 -   Res. 24491282
List of responsibilities consent being asked for (Expand as necessary)

> 1) Use the assigned type of feedback on students' writing drafts (603 students are expected to produce a minimum of 6 drafts over the whole semester, 2 drafts of each of the 2 essays, and 2 drafts of the 500-word report. Final drafts are not looked at as they are marked only with no feedback).
>
> 2) Photocopy each of the drafts after correction and before giving them back to the students (paper will be supplied for photocopying).
>
> 3) Complete 1 survey around week 9/10.
>
> 4) Record students' attitudes, if any, towards the selected type of WCF.
>
> 5) Help recruit student participants and have them sign the Student Consent Form.
>
> 6) Help students to complete 2 surveys, the first after receiving feedback on their 1st draft, while the second will be after receiving feedback on their 5th draft (= 1st draft of the 500-word report).
>
> 7) Recorded semi-structured interview towards the end of the semester

Participant: Please complete sections B & C ONLY

B	**Tick (√) as appropriate.**	**YES**	**NO**
	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above research project as indicated above and have had the opportunity to ask questions.		
	I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I can withdraw at any time, without having to give reasons for my withdrawal.		
	I understand that anonymized quotes of any data I provide for this research project may be used in future publications.		
	I agree to take part in the research study.		

C PRINT NAME (Participant): --
PRINT NAME (Researcher):   Dr. Farah Bahrouni
Both parties must have a copy of the completed form.
If you have any ethical concerns about this study or your participation in it, please feel free to contact the CPS Research and Conference Committee at the following address:
Khalfan Al-Kemyani
Office phone number: 24142112
Email: kemyani@squ.edu.om