Factors Influencing Learners' Preferences of Written Corrective Feedback by Teachers of English as a Foreign Language: The Case of Kigamboni Navy Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Research shows that proficiency levels, goals, interests, beliefs, and authentic contexts influence learners' responses to written corrective feedback (WCF). Thus, no one or two findings can fit in all second language (SL) teaching/learning contexts. Additionally, in the Tanzanian context, studies have revealed a mismatch between teachers' practices and learners' needs, and less attention is paid to the factors that influence learners' preferences on given WCF. The present study sought to explore learners' views by identifying the types of WCF provided by teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to their learners; and establish the factors influencing such learners' preferences for the WCF provided by such teachers in the context of foreign language classrooms. This case study involved 40 learners from the Kigamboni Navy Secondary School sampled purposively, where document review and focus group discussion were used to collect data, following Biber et al. In the taxonomy of WCF, the collected data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis methods. Findings revealed a disagreement between teachers' practice and learners' views for given types of WCF. In addition, learners' opinions of the WCF provided by teachers were influenced by learners' self-perceived ability, amount of information, comprehensiveness of the WCF, teachers' tone, and the scope of the WCF. This study recommends that, in providing WCF, teachers should focus on what works for learners. Also, teachers should focus on factors influencing learners' preferences for given WCF.

Keywords: *learners' preference, teachers, written corrective feedback, English as a foreign language, secondary schools*

1. Introduction

When second language (SL) learners commit errors in writing, teachers provide information to such learners that they can use to develop their interlanguage. Such information is referred to as corrective feedback (CF). Corrective feedback is an instructional strategy to help SL learners improve their language skills (Nakamura, 2016). Such feedback can be written (inserting a missing word in a sentence), or oral (recast). Written corrective feedback (WCF) is defined as a direct or indirect error correction, words of encouragement or praise, comments, advice, and suggestions that instruct students to change their written works (Irwin, 2017). WCF can take different forms, like error locating, which involves marking an erroneous form by underlining or highlighting; reformulation, which consists in re-writing the entire sentence that includes false forms; and comment, which involves comments in the margin or at the end of a text.

In classifying WCF, different studies have proposed various approaches to categorize types of WCF (cf. Biber et al., 2011; Ellis, 2009; Kang & Han, 2015; Liu & Brown, 2015; Sheen, 2011). These studies classify WCF across several dimensions: *source, mode, type, scope,* and *tone*. Biber et al. (2011) and Liu and Brown (2015) provide the descriptions of these dimensions, as synthesized by Nakamura (2016) as follows:

> The *source* refers to who provides feedback. As in the SLL, teachers are the most common suppliers; others might be classmates. *Mode* shows that WCF can be delivered electronically (Microsoft Word) and orally (supplier reads WCF out loud in a face-to-face setting; the WCF is recorded). The *scope* is concerned with whether a teacher attempts to correct almost all errors (un-focused) or select several linguistic features (mid-focus) or one specific feature (highly focused). *Tone* refers to the types of WCF that comments and identifies whether the comments are about what students have done well (positive) or what they have done poorly (negative).

There are various types of WCF, and some types are labeled differently. *Direct correction* involves a teacher providing the correct form in multiple ways, such as crossing out unnecessary words or phrases, inserting missing words, or writing the proper form below or near the erroneous form. *Reformulation* involves rewriting the entire sentence that includes incorrect forms. The idea is to create a target-like text while keeping the original text intact. Direct correction and reformulation can compose a more significant category of *immediate feedback*.

Error locating involves marking an erroneous form by underlining or highlighting, but it does not explain why it is an error or how it might be corrected. This dimension is typically labeled as *indirect feedback. Error coding* refers to using error codes typically consisting of abbreviated labels of the kinds of errors. Some commonly used error codes are 'sp,' i.e., spelling error, 'W.R,' i.e., wrong word, and 'rt,' missing article. *Metalinguistic feedback* involves providing explicit comments about the nature of errors that students have made. Error coding can be done using error codes similar to those above or providing an in-depth metalinguistic explanation of the mistakes. The *comment* refers to written comments in the margin or at the end of the text, typically regarding the progress of students' composition.

Learners' perceptions and preferences about teachers' feedback are significant aspects that cannot be ignored in second language learning (SLL). Research shows some similarities and differences across proficiency levels and learning contexts. For instance, Lee (2008) found learners' preferences for direct WCF to be relatively ambivalent, in which the learners showed contradictory opinions about their preferences for the same WCF. Previous studies have researched the factors affecting learners' preferences for given types of WCF. Among the factors revealed were learners' proficiency level (Zang et al., 2021), learners' goals, interests, and beliefs (Bitchener & Storch, 2016), and the teaching and learning contexts (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010).

Based on the mentioned factors, researchers suggest that no one or two findings regarding learners' preferences can fit all teaching-learning contexts. For example, according to Amerhein and Nassaji (2010), students from the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching context thought that teachers should provide WCF on as many errors as possible. Contrary to Amerhen and Nassaji (2010), Mahfoodh (2017) studied Malaysian EFL students' emotional responses toward teachers' WCF practices, and found that students were frustrated after receiving feedback on their writings. Thus, learners from different contexts respond differently to teachers' WCF.

Moreover, the study conducted by Seker and Dincer (2014) on Turkey's EFL context found that Turkish learners preferred to be corrected with only focused WCF on grammatical accuracy in their writing. Likewise, Zang et al. (2021), who researched Thai EFL learners, found that low-proficiency learners were in favour of explicit (direct) WCF types, while high-proficiency level learners rated them less. Therefore, students' views on WCF tend to vary not only from one teaching context to another but also within the same contexts of studies, which occurs as a result of both teachers' practices and learners' contextual factors influencing how learners view the WCF provided.

In the Tanzanian context, previous studies have investigated teachers' and learners' practices on WCF. For example, Lyimo et al. (2022) researched the feedback practices of secondary school teachers of EFL in Tanzania. The teachers believed positively about feedback in writing lessons, but there was a mismatch between what the teachers perceived to do and their actual feedback practices. Moreover, Elisifa (2019) assessed the opinions and preferences of Tanzania EFL students and their teachers about WCF. The study explored learners' feelings regarding the mood, tone, source, time; and whether there were differences between teachers' and students' opinions and preferences. The study concluded that, in handling learners' errors, teachers should consider their feelings and perceptions.

Findings of the previous studies suggest that research on the factors influencing learners' preferences on given WCF in the Tanzanian context has received little attention. Furthermore, regarding learners' perspectives, previous studies have focused on aspects related to mood, tone, source, and time; leaving out the aspects related to types and scope. Thus, on this basis, the present study sought to explore factors influencing learners' perspectives in Tanzanian EFL secondary schools' classrooms as a learning context. The paper specifically aims to identify the types of WCF teachers provide to learners of English in Tanzanian secondary school classrooms; and establish factors influencing learners' preferences for WCF supplied by their teachers.

2. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative case study approach under the constructivist paradigm, which relies on participants' views of the situation being

studied (cf. Creswell & Creswell, 2018), where a particular instance or a few carefully selected cases are studied intensively (Gilbert, 2008). The population of the present study consisted of all students taking EFL courses at the Kigamboni Navy Secondary School, and their teachers' corrected written assignments. This school was purposefully selected because its population includes learners with different ability levels from primary schools. Being a private school, it allows students from all wards found in Kigamboni to enroll. Also, this school's population was unique because it involved students from both urban and rural areas of Kigamboni District. It is a public-private secondary school owned by the Kigamboni Navy Base since 1996. Also, it is among the oldest secondary schools in the District, with Form One up to Form Four level. It has more than 376 students, all taking English Language as a compulsory subject. Each class has 45 to 50 students with two streams. There is at least one teacher of English Language subject in each category. As a secondary school that provides EFL courses, this school provided adequate data to address the present study's objectives. Data obtained from this school were deemed to be relevant enough to understand how EFL teachers provide WCF to their learners, and how such learners' preferences are influenced by the WCF provided.

In the sampling procedure, the researcher purposively used all eighty EFL students of Form Two (42) and Form Four (38). The selection of these classes was motivated by the tradition of providing more writing assignments in the courses with national examinations. More writing ensured an adequate source of documents for analysis. At another stage, simple random sampling was used to select forty (40) exercise books from the two classes (21 from Form Two and 19 from Form Four). Accordingly, forty students whose exercise books were sampled participated in focus group discussions (GGDs). Based on the study's objectives, document review and FGDs were used to collect data. The document review involved noting relevant types of WCF found in the student's written assignments. The WCF was recorded in a checklist based on the types and scope adopted from Biber et al.'s (2011) typology of WCF. Then, the types of WCF collected from the written assignment were used as reference points for preparing questions used in the FGDs. The discussions involved four sessions, where each session involved ten participants.

The present study involved two phases of data analysis, where data collected via document review were analyzed before collecting data via FGDs. An analysis of the document review data was done before the collection of other data because they were used as points of reference in structuring the questions for discussion. All feedback found were grouped in their respective categories grounded on Biber et al.'s (2011) taxonomy of WCF. The WCF categories were only those related to types (direct, indirect, metalinguistics, and comments); and scope (un-focused, mid-focused, and focused). These categories were used for asking learners about their preferences on WCF, which helped to determine factors that affected such preferences. Accordingly, the thematic analysis method was used

to analyze FGD data. The audio-recorded discussion was transcribed, and the transcriptions of each session were analyzed to obtain minor themes. Then, all themes of the four sessions were combined thematically to get the major themes.

3. Results and discussion
3.1 Types of WCF provided by Teachers to Learners of English
Based on the first research question, document review was done in the learners' English Language written assignments, given by their respective teachers, where simple random sampling was conducted to get 40 exercise books used for document review.

Generally, based on the first objective, the data show that metalinguistics (28%), comments (30%), crossing words (43.3%), and mid-focused (52%) were the most WCF used by teachers; whereas reformulations (13.3%) and highly focused (17.6%) were the least WCF used; while error coding was not used at all by the teachers. All these findings imply the following.

Table 1 shows the direct WCF used by teachers in EFL learners' assignments. In the case of direct WCF, literature shows that teachers used crossing words rather than other feedbacks like reformulation because the former is simple to use while the latter would need time to think and paraphrase all ill-formed sentences. Thus, in providing WCF, it seems teachers would like to work at their convenience by simplifying their work. The convenience is evidenced in the study conducted by Sebonde and Biseko (2013), where Tanzanian EFL teachers selected the CF to use in classrooms based on either experience or the need to simplify their work; and not the pedagogical requirement.

Table 1: Direct WCF used by teachers in EFL learners' assignments

Specific WCF	Frequency	% Covered
Crossing words	13	43.3
Inserting missing words	7	23.3
Writing correct words(s) near/ below erroneous form	6	20
Reformulation	4	13.3
Total	**30**	**100**

Table 2 shows the indirect WCF used by teachers in EFL learners' assignments. Previous studies have shown how EFL learners prefer using codes (e.g., 'sp'- spelling/ 'wr' – wrong word) to inform learners of ill-formed sentences explicitly (cf. Diab, 2015). In the present study, learners show high interest in explicit WCF, like error coding; while teachers seem not to prefer providing such feedback to learners. This finding implies that, in most cases, teachers do provide WCF to their learners without considering their interests, which is also supported in the study by Li and Vuano (2019), who found that despite participants' solid preferences for metalinguistic explanation, almost all reported that they rarely received it in class.

Table 2: Indirect WCF used by teachers in EFL learners' assignments

Specific WCF	Frequencies	% Covered
Rounding erroneous forms	10	20
Underlining erroneous forms	11	22
Error coding	0	0
Comment	15	30
Metalinguistics	14	28
Total	**50**	**100**

Table 3 shows the scope of WCF teachers use in EFL learners' assignments. In the case of scope, a mid-focused scope, which involves the provision of WCF by focusing on several selected language aspects, covers more than 50%; while highly-focused, which deals with one specific language aspect, covers less than 18% of the feedback given: implying that teachers would prefer to provide input that covers several language aspects at once. It is difficult for a teacher to deal with one aspect only while reading learners' works.

Table 3: Scope of WCF used by teachers in EFL learners' assignments

Specific WCF	Frequencies	% Covered
Un-focused	5	29.4
Mid-focused	9	52.9
Highly-focused	3	17.6
Total	**17**	**100**

4. Factors influencing learners' preferences for the WCF provided by teachers

This section analyzes and discusses data on the factors influencing English Language learners' preferences on WCF provided by their teachers. Based on the learners' explanations during the FGDs, the following were the factors identified:

4.1 Amount of information given in the WCF provided

One of the factors that influenced learners' preferences for feedback was the amount of information given by teachers in the WCF. Based on the learners' views, the types of feedback that provide detailed information are preferred to those that offer less information, and are not informative enough to explain erroneous forms. For instance, during FGDs learners said they chose to be given reformulations that are detailed enough to act as a platform for further revision. At the same time, others suggested not to prefer underlining erroneous forms that are too indirect with no explanation, which makes it difficult for them to understand. During the FGDs, English Language learners had the following to say:

I like the way teachers re-write a complete sentence or correct some phrases with enough information because I get an opportunity to learn about my problems in detail **(LFVI, G1, April 11th, 2022).**

When a teacher underlines a word or words, it is too difficult for me to see where the problem is because there is no explanation to help me understand the problem's nature so that I can work on it **(LFVI, G2, April 13, 2022).**

The above suggests that the amount of information the WCF provided influenced learners' preferences on the types of feedback in the present study. Findings have revealed that some learners would prefer to be given detailed information about erroneous form so that they understand the nature of the problem. For instance, it is tough for them to understand the nature of an error with indirect underlining compared to a direct comment/metalinguistic, which explains the nature of a problem, and sometimes suggests the appropriate structure. The preference to metalinguistic is reflected in previous studies, such as Lee (2017), who found that the type of metalinguistic explanation investigated was considered highly explicit; which not only located the errors but also provided detailed information about why they occurred, and how they can be corrected. The provision of metalinguistic explanations enables learners to notice and understand errors. It also allow them to engage in guided learning and problem-solving (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008).

However, in the present study, it was revealed that the provision of metalinguistic explanations does not ensure learners' comprehension of a feedback. Sometimes learners (particularly those who are less capable) would not prefer comments that are expressed with difficult words, an aspect that concurs with previous studies, which found that learners may find it challenging to deal with item-based errors when a metalinguistic explanation is provided. According to Ellis (2005), the difficulty may be attributed to their lack of knowledge of the target feature

4.2 Learners' ability to understand a comment
Study findings show that learners' perceived ability has a more significant influence on their preferences for a given WCF than others. For instance, indirect WCF feedback, like highlighting erroneous forms that are recast in nature, is highly preferred by learners who regard themselves as more autonomous than dependent ones. The reason is that while incapable learners are challenged to understand indirect WCFs, independent learners would like to take a challenge as part of learning. Thus, learners' perceived ability to understand the nature of the feedback provided influences their preferences for given types of feedback. The following extracts exemplify the learners' views via FGDs:

> *I prefer a teacher to insert a correct word in my work because it directly gives me a right word to learn, rather than underlining, which does not tell me what the problem is, and in most cases, I fail to notice the problem* **(LFII, G2, April 14th, 2022).**

> *Just underlining wrong words/phrases is preferable because it gives me a challenge to think about the problem, which is a part of exercising and improving my English* **(LFIV, G1, April 11th, 2022).**

The above quotes suggest that while incapable self-perceived learners would not prefer indirect feedback, which need some knowledge to work on, capable learners would take it as a challenge to improve their learning. The study's finding conforms to what was reported by Chen et al. (2016), that perception of WCF on grammatical errors varied among Chinese EFL learners with different proficiency levels: while error code was preferred by intermediate learners, advanced learners preferred overt correction.

4.3 Feedback's comprehensiveness

According to the study's findings, comprehensiveness was another factor that influenced learners' preferences for a particular WCF. Some learners felt that the depth of clarification provided by teachers could encourage or discourage them from understanding and dealing with the WCF provided. For example, the learners said that they would prefer to be given writing correct forms near or below erroneous forms, metalinguistics, and comments because they provide more precise information than other indirect feedback like underlining/ highlighting false forms. The quote from a participant of one of the FGDs supports the above:

> *I want to be corrected with comments because they have language that explains the nature of my mistakes clearly. Giving feedback, like underlining erroneous words, tends to be very indirect and unclear* **(LFII, G1, April 13th, 2022).**

The above quote suggests that when WCFs are provided with clarity, learners understand them quickly because they explain to them how to correct their errors. In contrast, feedback that seems to be unclear to learners discourages their understanding of the error corrected. The level of clarification has also been revealed as a factor influencing learners' preferences for given types of WCF in the present study. It seems some learners would prefer clarified feedback (commented direct feedback) to less clarified ones (indirect uncommented feedback) because they help them understand the nature of the problem. This observation is in agreement with what has been reported in the literature (Zang et al., 2021; Lee, 2017), where it is argued that the provision of metalinguistic explanation enables learners to notice and understand errors, while indirect uncommented feedback can be difficult for learners to interpret. Nonetheless, the literature also shows that having plenty of metalinguistic comments in a feedback does not guarantee learners' understanding of WCF. For instance, Bonila-Lopez et al. (2018) and Guo and Barrot (2019) revealed that learners find it challenging to deal with the same metalinguistic comments on item-based errors if they lack knowledge of the target vocabulary (language) used in the comment. Likewise, in the present study, some learners preferred simple inserted words on wrong forms, while expressing a low preference for indirect comments with complex language.

3.5 Tone of the comment provided

The tone of the feedback refers to the types of WCF that comment and identify whether the comments are about what students have done well (positive), or what they have done poorly (negative). During the FGDs, some learners pointed out that they prefer to be corrected with WCFs that are of a positive tone because those with a negative tone tend to discourage their confidence towards learning English. For example, some learners disliked/hated direct crossing words feedback because it was too harsh. Some said they do not prefer unfocused feedback because correcting each error encountered makes them feel weak and uncomfortable.

Furthermore, some learners felt that the comments teachers provided greatly influenced their preferences. For example, a few remarks like *very poor*, or *see me*, tended to discourage or threaten them in learning the English Language; while comments like *good try*, *keep it up*, and *excellent* were very encouraging and helped them to learn positively. Hereunder are a few quotes in support of the above:

> *Crossing words does not impress me because they sound damaging to me* **(LFII, G1, April 11th, 2022)**.

> *I would not say I like comments like 'see me' because, with this comment, I feel threatened even to go and meet the teacher, especially when my work has so many errors* **(LFIV, G2, April 14th, 2022)**.

> *As for me, it is very different from my friends here. I usually regard a comment as an opportunity to meet with my teacher and ask other questions* **(LFII, G2, April 14th, 2022)**.

The above quotes show how different learners react toward the tone of the WCF provided. For instance, while some learners regard the comment '*see me*' as an opportunity to meet teachers for further learning, others consider it a threat that discourages them from meeting such teachers. Thus, there is a need for English language teachers to consider the varying perceptions of the learners in their provision of WCF. The study's findings can be compared with that of Elisifa (2019), who found that learners favoured teachers' WCF that is positive. Thus, a positive attitude towards learners' errors and mistakes makes learners feel more comfortable and confident in language learning.

3.6 Scope of the feedback provided

Feedback's scope has also influenced learners' preferences of the WCF in the present study, where study findings show that learners were less interested in being corrected for every error they committed (unfocused correction) because it made them feel less confident, incompetent, and too weak to learn English because it involves noticing many errors. Moreover, in the FGDs, some learners expressed their interest in being corrected on several aspects of language, which gives them a focus.

> *Correcting every error in my written assignment irritates me because it kills my confidence, and I feel uncomfortable having them in my book or paper* **(LFIV, G1, April 11th, 2022)**.

> *I am very impressed by feedback that focuses on several selected aspects because I believe that several corrected mistakes are comprehensive enough to provide a given quantity of aspects I can learn at once* **(LFII, G2, April 14th, 2022)**.

The study's observation concurs with that of Nakamura (2016), whereby respondents strongly preferred receiving feedback focused on grammatical accuracy rather than those that were unfocused. However, some learners preferred unfocussed WCF, believing that being correct in every aspect would help them learn many elements at once. Consider the following extract:

> *I like to be corrected in every aspect of my writing because it is comprehensible, thus allowing me to find my mistakes in many aspects of language simultaneously* **(LFIV, G1, April 11th, 2022)**.

The extract above is evidence that the scope of the WCF provided can influence learners' preferences. This conforms to the findings by Reguied and Hamitouche (2022), where learners expressed their preferences for unfocused feedback because it contributes to learning in many aspects. The finding also concurs with other previous studies (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Lee, 2008) that learners preferred all mistakes in their writing be corrected because they thought it pushes them to become aware of the gaps and problems in their SL system, as suggested in the output hypothesis of SLL (cf. Swain, 1995). Moreover, variation of findings in the compared studies is attributed to the fact that learners' preferences for WCF are highly influenced by contextual factors such as learners' goals, interests, and beliefs, teaching-learning context, and the nature of the feedback provided (i.e., scope). Thus, teachers and researchers should consider these contextual variables when providing different WCFs to learners.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

The findings of this study show that, based on the scope and types of WCF, teachers mainly relied on indirect and mid-focused WCF rather than direct and highly focused/unfocused WCF. Error coding was not identified in all learners' written assignments, although the learners preferred such feedback. Also, learners' preferences for different types of WCF relied on individual interests and experiences. In contrast, learners' perceived ability to understand the WCF provided, the amount of information, comprehensiveness of the WCF, tone of the WCF provided, and scope of the WCF: all influenced learners' preferences on given types of WCF. Therefore, the study recommends that although WCF facilitates SLL as advanced by Swains' output hypothesis, teachers are urged to consider factors that influence such learners' preferences because some WCFs may work or not work for learners depending on factors such as learners' perceived ability, amount of information, comprehensiveness, tone, and scope. In addition, since teachers' voices were not captured in the present study, there is a need for a study that will allow teachers to provide their views on the different WCFs they provide to their learners.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Typology and description of WCF adopted from Biber et al**. (2011**)

Type	Subtype	Description
SOURCE		Refers to who provides feedback. As in the SLL, teachers are the most common suppliers; others might be classmates.
MODE		Shows that WCF can be provided electronically (Microsoft Word) and orally (supplier reads WCF out loud in a face-to-face setting; the WCF is recorded).
SCOPE	**Un-focused**	A teacher attempts to correct almost all errors
	Mid-focus	It involves the selection of several linguistic features to correct
	Highly-focused	Only one specific feature is corrected.
TONE		Refers to the types of WCF that comment and identifies whether the comments are about what students have done well (positive) or what they have done poorly (negative).
TYPE	**Direct correction**	**Direct correction** involves a teacher providing the correct form in various ways, such as crossing out unnecessary words or phrases, inserting missing words, or writing the proper form below or near the erroneous form.
		Reformulation involves rewriting the entire sentence that includes erroneous forms. The idea is to create a target-like text while keeping the original text intact. Direct correction and reformulation can compose a more significant category of immediate feedback.
	Indirect feedback	**Error locating** involves marking an erroneous form by underlining or highlighting, but it does not explain why it is an error or how it might be corrected.
		Error coding refers to using error codes typically consisting of abbreviated labels of the kinds of errors. Some commonly used error codes are 'sp,' i.e., spelling error, 'W.R,' i.e., wrong word, and 'rt,' missing article**.**
		Metalinguistic feedback involves providing explicit comments about the nature of errors that students have made, which can be done by using error codes similar to those above or providing an in-depth explanation of the mistakes.
		The comment refers to written comments in the margin or at the end of the text, typically regarding the progress of students' composition.

Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion participants' key

LFII G1:   Form Two learners participated in the focus group discussion 1
LFII G2:   Form Two learners participated in the focus group discussion 2
LFIV G1: Form Four learners participated in the focus group discussion 1
LFIV G2: Form Two learners participated in the focus group discussion 2