

## L2 Writing Teachers' Perceptions and Problems Regarding Written Corrective Feedback: Does Holding a TEFL Degree matter?

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### Abstract

SLA research has scarcely explored whether holding a TEFL degree affects teachers' beliefs about written corrective feedback (WCF). The present study was an attempt to survey the perceptions of 47 TEFL-degree holders (TDH) and 39 non-TEFL-degree holders (NTDH) teaching English for general purposes about different aspects of WCF as well as the problems they have putting their perceptions into practice. The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire eliciting their perceptions about different aspects of written error correction. Ten TDH and 10 NTDH teachers were then randomly selected for the follow-up interview. The findings of the questionnaire and the interview revealed that compared to their counterparts, TDH teachers favored more selective and indirect types of WCF and tended to use more varieties of error correction techniques. Nevertheless, both groups of teachers complained that time constraints largely influenced their amount and type of feedback. The results further suggested that since it was often found baffling to language learners, most teachers did not use a marking code when providing WCF. This study implicates that teacher trainers should pay due attention to NTDH teachers' awareness of SLA theories for teaching grammar and acquaint them with different types of error correction techniques.

**Keywords:** Error correction; Writing; Written corrective feedback; Teachers' perceptions

### Introduction

Writing is one of the basic communication skills which is usually approached in language classrooms in two ways. It is sometimes viewed as a way to learn language forms and in other times it is regarded as a means of communicating messages (Chastain, 1988). Whether the goal of writing is primarily linguistic or communicative, grammar has always played an important role in teaching L2 writing. Focus on grammar during writing activities is usually manifested in the form of error correction. In fact, error correction was, is, and probably will be the quintessence of language teaching and without providing feedback what remains can hardly be called teaching. It is yet one of the trickiest responsibilities all teachers have in language classrooms. Since Truscott (1996) invited language practitioners and researchers to prove their faith in the efficacy of WCF by empirical evidence, a large number of studies have examined its effectiveness in helping learners improve their grammatical accuracy (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Ferris, 1997; Truscott & Hsu, 2008). Alongside these experimental studies, a growing body of research has investigated how teachers and students perceive different aspects of WCF, and the reasons behind their preferences (e.g., Lee, 2004, 2009; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Schulz, 1996, 2001). These studies have sought to explore whether, how, and why teachers' and students' attitudes toward WCF influence its effectiveness in different contexts. Although previous research has investigated teachers' and students' attitudes toward error correction, fewer studies explored whether and how teachers' and learners' individual characteristics

affect their perceptions of optimal CF. Concerning teachers' characteristics, one issue which has not been investigated is whether holding a TEFL degree affects language instructors' attitudes toward error feedback. The present study examines and compares TDH and NTDH Writing teachers' Perceptions and Problems Regarding Written Corrective Feedback.

### **Literature Review**

The findings of studies which examined the effectiveness of different types of WCF as well as those exploring the perceptions of teachers and students regarding error correction highlighted three key issues pertinent to language instructors in writing classrooms: (1) whether or not to correct learners' grammatical errors, (2) whether the error correction should be explicit or implicit, and (3) whether the corrective feedback should be selective or comprehensive.

#### ***Correction versus No Correction***

Although a lot of experiments have been carried out on the efficacy of error correction in writing, research about its effectiveness is still inconclusive. There is evidence that suggests WCF is effective and teachers should provide learners with error feedback (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007); however, there is also research whose results cast doubt on its effectiveness (e.g., Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Truscott & Hsu, 2008).

Aside from empirical evidence, researchers in the field also proposed theoretical arguments on the positive and negative effects of CF. On one hand, drawing upon Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, many believe positive evidence (about acceptable target linguistic features) alone does not lead to successful language acquisition, and argue negative evidence (about unacceptable target linguistic features), arising from negotiation for meaning, also plays a crucial role in helping learners improve their language proficiency. Another argument for the positive role of error feedback resides in Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis. It is believed negative feedback can help students notice the gap between the linguistic forms in their interlanguage and those in the target language. Besides, during hypothesis-testing, another function of learners' output, CF can enable students to make judgments about the acceptability of the linguistic forms they just produced. Finally, as conscious attention to linguistic features is considered facilitative to interlanguage development (Schmidt, 2001), corrective feedback can have a positive impact on learners' language acquisition. On the other hand, it is argued that error correction, especially in written form, is either ineffective or even harmful to learners' L2 development. Truscott (1996) claimed that since teachers fail to account for learners' developmental sequences proposed by Pienemann's (1989) Learnability Hypothesis, students usually receive WCF for which they are not developmentally ready. Thus, as teacher WCF usually addresses linguistic features which are beyond students' current developmental stage, it will be ineffective. Drawing upon Krashen's (1982) distinction between learning and acquisition, Truscott (1996) also argued transfer of information from teachers to learners by providing WCF is not sufficient for language acquisition and used the term *pseudolearning* to refer to the superficial knowledge formed as a result of teacher correction. Raising learners' affective filter and causing them to avoid using the targeted structures in the future writing tasks which can lead to less complex language use are among the other objections to WCF thought to be even harmful to learners' L2 development (Krashen, 1982; Sheppard, 1992).

As far as language teachers' and learners' perceptions are concerned, the results of previous studies indicate that both teachers and students share the belief that grammatical errors should be addressed in one way or another (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Ancker, 2000; Jean & Simard, 2011; Lee, 2003, 2004). This finding is sometimes used to argue that providing corrective feedback is a must in language classrooms whether it is effective or not.

### ***Explicit versus Implicit Corrective Feedback***

It is usually argued that direct WCF is more appropriate than indirect WCF for less proficient language learners and that the use of indirect feedback tends to make revision tasks burdensome for elementary student writers (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). According to Chandler (2003), direct feedback works best when learners are required to revise their previously written drafts. She further adds that direct feedback is more helpful to learners because it is easier to understand and does not lead to any confusion. Direct WCF is also advantageous in post-writing activities where learners can focus on errors they could not identify on their own. It will also give them the chance to review their corrected errors in the future writing tasks (Ferris, 2002). Nevertheless, as Ferris (2004) implies, if teachers look for maximum processing on the part of students, explicit feedback fails to engage learners in deep cognitive problem-solving during self-editing phase. Another shortcoming of direct WCF is that sometimes teachers unintentionally impose the use of a particular linguistic item, while the learner meant to use a different structure (Ferris, 2002). Since indirect WCF leaves the correction of erroneous production on the shoulder of learners themselves, it requires them to engage in a deep cognitive problem-solving process which is thought to be more beneficial to language learners' long-term linguistic improvement than direct feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003; Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013). It is especially the case when learners possess the essential language knowledge regarding the targeted error, otherwise direct WCF can be a better choice. As Ferris (2006) concludes, although direct WCF is slightly more effective in the short run, indirect WCF results in more error reduction after a course of a study. Nevertheless, to Chandler (2003), this long-term advantage of indirect feedback is usually cancelled out when it takes a long time till learners understand whether their hypothesized self-correction is correct or not. Although researchers attribute certain advantages and disadvantages to direct and indirect error correction, most studies found no significant difference between the effectiveness of explicit and implicit CF (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Semke, 1984).

In the study conducted by Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) which investigated teachers' and students' preferences for the directness of CF, it was found that while most teachers believe providing direct error correction is time consuming and does not deeply engage learners in the process of error correction, learners favored direct CF as they expected readily available corrections. Lee (2004) concludes that while most teachers prefer to correct learners' errors both directly and indirectly, learners mostly expect explicit feedback and believe indirect feedback cannot help them improve their grammatical accuracy.

### ***Comprehensive versus Selective Corrective Feedback***

Another important issue teachers are faced with in writing classes is whether to mark learners' errors comprehensively or selectively. Research on written error correction has shown that while unfocused WCF does not have a significant effect on learners' grammatical accuracy in the long run on a new writing task (e.g., Truscott & Hsu, 2008), focused WCF can help language learners significantly improve their grammatical accuracy both during revision process and on a new writing task after an interval (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007).

Ellis (2009) believes since focused feedback provides learners with the possibility to analyze multiple corrections of a specific error category, it is more probable that learners notice and acquire the correct form. Xu (2009), however, warns that too much control over a specific aspect of grammar may result in learners' disregard of other aspects of grammar. According to Ferris (2010), compared with a selective approach to error correction, unfocused feedback is usually shown by empirical studies to be pedagogically less effective. Nevertheless, she believes selective WCF is

sometimes too narrowly focused and fails to address language learners' diverse needs. Ellis (2009) also argues that although unfocused feedback may not be as effective as focused feedback in helping students improve their writing accuracy regarding specific language features, it has the advantage of making learners sensitive to a wide range of error categories.

The findings of qualitative studies which examined teachers' beliefs about the optimal amount of WCF indicate that teachers tend to provide comprehensive error correction (e.g., Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Lee, 2005; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Follow-up interviews, however, suggest that they do not necessarily think comprehensive error treatment is more effective, rather they provide comprehensive WCF to meet students' expectations.

The main purpose of the present study was to examine and compare the preferences of TDH and NTDH teachers with regard to these three key issues and to specify the difficulties they have in putting their beliefs into practice in writing classes. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are TDH and NTDH teachers' perspectives regarding error feedback in writing classrooms?
2. What are TDH and NTDH teachers' problems regarding error feedback in writing classrooms?

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

In order to obtain teachers' attitudes toward WCF through the questionnaire, 47 TDH (20 males and 27 females) and 39 NTDH (11 males and 28 females) teachers, who had at least three years' experience of teaching English, were randomly selected from Tehran ELT institutes. Out of the 47 TDH teachers, 24 were BA holders, 21 were MA holders, and only two were PhD holders. Originally, 41 NTDH teachers participated in the study, but two of them were excluded from the sample for they had a CELTA. Their responses were not analyzed as they were expected to be fully familiar with SLA theories for grammar instruction and error correction which made them different from other NTDH teachers. In the present study, a TEFL-degree-holder teacher refers to an English language instructor who holds a degree (BA, MA, or PhD) in TEFL, whereas a non-TEFL-degree-holder teacher refers to an English language instructor who does not hold a degree in TEFL.

### ***Instruments***

The researcher employed a questionnaire which obtained TDH and NTDH teachers' attitudes toward different aspects of WCF including whether and how often it should be provided at different proficiency levels, who should be the delivering agent of error correction, how often error codes should be used, what written error correction techniques are more appropriate for learners of different proficiency levels, and what are the teachers' limitations for practicing their beliefs in real classroom contexts (see Appendix A for the WCF questionnaire adapted from Lee, 2004). In addition, a follow-up interview was used to invite teachers to explain more on some of their responses to the questionnaire items (see Appendix B for the WCF interview).

### ***Procedure***

Before the participants filled out the teacher questionnaire, they were informed of the purpose of the study and signed a consent form. They were assured that their responses would be considered confidential and no one would have access to them. Those who also participated in the follow-up interview were informed that their interviews were going to be recorded and that their answers would be used only for research purposes.

The researcher distributed the teacher questionnaire, with a cover letter introducing the researcher and explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, among the participants either directly or

via email. Furthermore, 10 TDH and 10 NTDH teachers from the participants took part in the follow-up interviews which were audio-taped for further analysis. Since the amount of collected data was large, only the most significant findings are discussed in the results section below.

### Results and Discussion

In order to answer the research questions posed in this paper, the descriptive statistics of the results obtained from the questionnaire as well as the verbatim data from the interviews are reported below.

The questionnaire data (see question 1, section 2 in Appendix A) show that, except for a small minority of TDH teachers (6%) who believed providing elementary students with WCF is not beneficial, nearly all the teachers marked their students' written errors either selectively or comprehensively. Nevertheless, whether they held a TEFL degree and the level at which they were teaching influenced their preferences for optimal WCF they wished to provide. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the results of TDH and NTDH teachers' general views about the optimal amount of WCF for correcting learners' errors at different proficiency levels. As indicated in Table 1, TDH teachers preferred to mark learners' errors selectively at the elementary and the intermediate levels, and believed as students' language proficiency improves, they can benefit more from comprehensive WCF. One of the TDH teachers explained, "elementary students do not know much grammar and if you correct all of their errors, they become confused. But advanced students expect us to correct all errors [and] if we don't do it, they think we don't know the rules".

**Table 1: TDH teachers' views toward comprehensive vs. selective error correction**

| Teachers' perceptions of their error feedback | % of teachers |              |          |
|---|---------------|--------------|----------|
|   | Elementary    | Intermediate | Advanced |
| I don't mark students' errors in writing      | 6             | 0            | 0        |
| I mark students' errors selectively           |               |              |          |
| About 1/3                                     | 17            | 21           | 4        |
| About 2/3                                     | 45            | 40           | 9        |
| More than 2/3                                 | 11            | 13           | 17       |
| I mark all students' errors.                  | 21            | 26           | 70       |

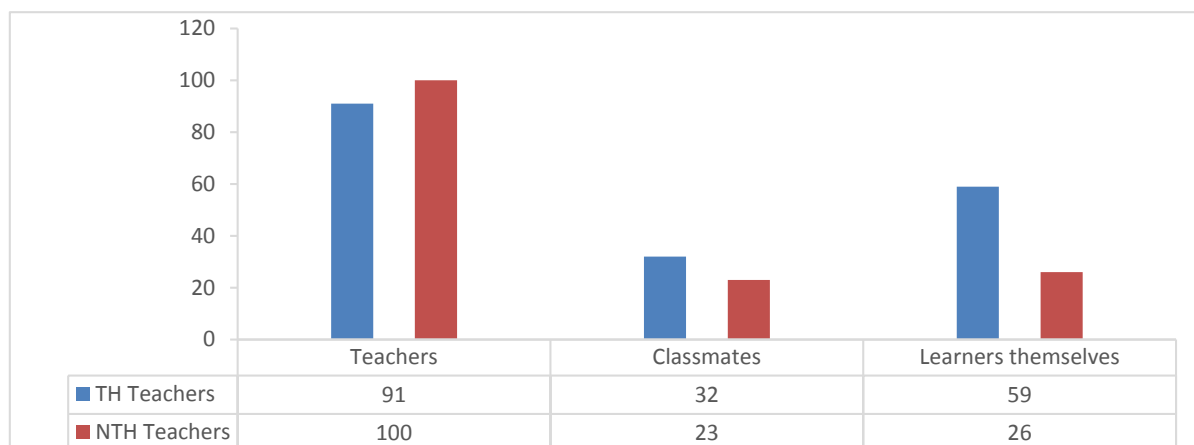
NTDH teachers also thought it was not a good idea to provide elementary students with comprehensive WCF (see Table 2). Contrary to TDH teachers, however, they highly favored comprehensive error correction for intermediate language learners. The comparison between the two groups' views about the optimal amount of error correction suggests, compared with their counterparts, NTDH teachers tend to provide more comprehensive error correction. Although NTDH teachers' preferences for intermediate and advanced students were similar to those found in other studies where teachers favored comprehensive error correction (e.g., Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Lee, 2003, 2004), TDH teachers believed comprehensive WCF is only beneficial to advanced language learners. According to the follow-up interviews, the main reason behind teachers' inclination toward comprehensive WCF is the fear of losing their face, similar to other studies (e.g., Ancker, 2000; Jean & Simard, 2011; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Schulz, 1996), most students expect their teachers to correct all of their errors. They complained if they failed to correct all errors as learners' previous teachers used to do, students would regard it as their lack of knowledge. The data from the interviews also indicate that affective factors can sometimes influence the amount of teachers' WCF. A number of teachers added the amount of WCF they provide sometimes depends on how motivated the receivers of feedback are. They believed if some students are highly motivated, it is less likely for them to become disappointed at the sight of much error

treatment. Conversely, with less confident and less motivated learners, it is more appropriate to be selective. All of the teachers who preferred to mark students' errors selectively believed the selected errors should be directly linked to grammar instruction in the classroom, a large majority of them assumed they can also mark based on their perceptions of learners' needs (TDHTs= 71%, NTDHTs= 87%), and only a few of them favored error correction on an ad hoc basis (TDHTs= 14%, NTDHTs= 16%). These findings are in contrast with the results of the study conducted in Hong Kong where L2 teachers preferred to select errors on an ad hoc basis rather than selecting error types according to students' specific needs (Lee, 2003).

**Table 2: NTDH teachers' views toward comprehensive vs. selective error correction**

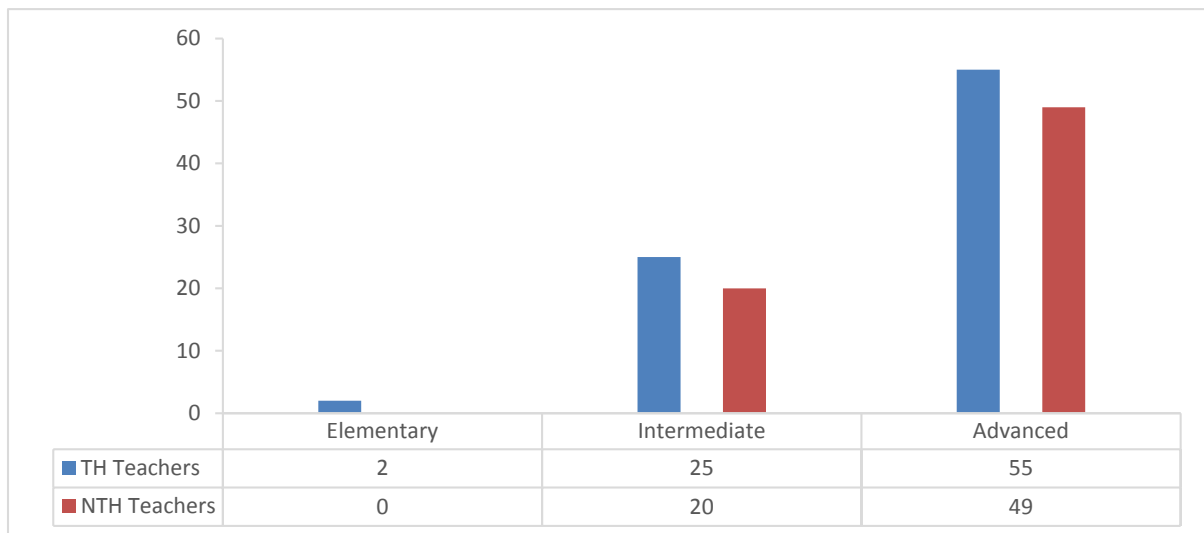
| Teachers' perceptions of their error feedback | % of teachers |              |          |
|---|---------------|--------------|----------|
|   | Elementary    | Intermediate | Advanced |
| I don't mark students' errors in writing      | 0             | 0            | 0        |
| I mark students' errors selectively           |               |              |          |
| About 1/3                                     | 28            | 0            | 0        |
| About 2/3                                     | 43            | 8            | 13       |
| More than 2/3                                 | 11            | 15           | 2        |
| I mark all students' errors.                  | 18            | 77           | 85       |

Another concern of the questionnaire was who the teachers think should be responsible for correcting students' written errors (see question 4, section 2 in Appendix A). As seen in Figure 1, whereas both TDH teachers and NTDH teachers regarded teachers as the best provider of WCF (TDHTs= 91%, NTDHTs= 100%), they relatively thought low of peer feedback (TDHTs= 32%, NTDHTs= 23%). These findings corroborate those of previous studies (Lee, 2003, 2004). Figure 4.2 also demonstrates that there is a noticeable difference between the TDH teachers' and NTDH teachers' attitudes regarding learners being responsible for correcting their own errors (TDHTs= 59%, NTDHTs= 26%). This finding was not surprising as, compared with NTDHTs, TDH teachers have a more positive view toward indirect WCF. Technical knowledge about concepts such as interlanguage development, discovery learning, and learner autonomy explains the importance TDH teachers attach to self-correction. As Lee (2009) puts it, "without being asked to perform self-/peer-editing or evaluation, students are not provided with opportunities to develop responsibility for learning".



**Figure 1: Teachers' views on the delivering agent of error treatment**

The questionnaire data (see question 5, section 2 in Appendix A) show that nearly half of the teachers use error codes in marking learners' writing (TDHTs= 55%, NTDHTs= 49%). As demonstrated in Figure 2, whereas all of them preferred to use error codes when marking advanced students' writing, except for two TDH teachers, none of them thought it is a good idea to provide elementary students with error codes. Both TDH and NTDH teachers believed too much error codes may confuse and overwhelm language learners during revision process. They also complained it takes too much time to categorize all types of errors and teach the error codes to their students. One of the teacher suggested, "it is better if we only use error codes for common errors, not for all errors". Similarly, studies conducted by Lee (2003, 2009) revealed that teachers face many difficulties when they use error codes. Nevertheless, as required by Education Department's recommendation, a large number of teachers use error codes when they provide WCF.



**Figure 2: Teachers' attitudes toward the use of error codes at different proficiency levels**

When teachers were asked how frequent they use various WCF techniques at different proficiency levels (see question 6, section 2 in Appendix A), as with previous studies (Lee, 2003, 2004), it was found that both TDH and NTDH teachers do not favor "hint at the location" or "hint at the location + categorization". Although TDH teachers were slightly more open to less commonly used techniques of error correction, the findings suggest that Iranian English teachers need to be familiarized with merits of different techniques for WCF. For instance, hint at the location can be a good technique for making advanced students engage more in the revision process, or categorization could be used to make learners sensitive to more frequent errors.

According to the questionnaire data, direct uncoded error feedback where teachers indicate (underline/circle) errors and provide the correct form was the most preferred error correction technique irrespective of the proficiency level. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, except for two TDH teachers, all the participants viewed direct uncoded WCF (indication + correction) as the only error correction technique effective at the elementary level. The second most favorite WCF technique was indirect uncoded correction where teachers only indicate the erroneous production by underlining or circling. While this technique was not considered appropriate at the elementary level, half of the teachers at the intermediate level and a large majority of them at the advanced level favored this technique for marking learners' errors. In Lee's (2004) study, it was also found that direct uncoded WCF is one of the most favorite strategies for correcting written errors; nevertheless, indirect coded

error correction where underlining or circling is accompanied by categorization of error types was preferred over indirect uncoded WCF. The follow-up interviews indicated that it is believed less proficient students do not benefit much from indirect correction, whereas having a good command of grammar, advanced learners are ready to self-correct with the help of indirect CF. Brown (2007) also suggests that as learners become more proficient in the target language at their systematic and stabilization stages of L2 development, they become capable of self-correction. In teachers' perspectives, since indirect WCF requires language learners to draw upon their knowledge of grammar during revision, it is more effective than direct correction especially in the long term. Nevertheless, for some teachers, the objectives of the course were a determining factor for the type of technique they used for error correction. They argued they often have to provide more direct feedback for students preparing for IELTS or TOEFL exams as they cannot tolerate ambiguity and need readily available corrections.

**Table 3: TDH teachers' views toward different error correction techniques**

| Teachers' perceptions of their error feedback | % of teachers |              |          |
|---|---------------|--------------|----------|
|   | Elementary    | Intermediate | Advanced |
| Indication + Correction + Categorization      | 4             | 17           | 21       |
| Indication + Correction                       | 96            | 89           | 68       |
| Indication + Categorization                   | 2             | 32           | 57       |
| Indication                                    | 2             | 53           | 89       |
| Hint at the location + Categorization         | 0             | 17           | 42       |
| Hint at the location                          | 0             | 11           | 38       |

All in all, the results show that teachers, especially NTDHTs, mainly relied only on two strategies of direct uncoded WCF (Indication + Correction) and indirect uncoded WCF (indication) for marking learners' errors. This finding suggests that teachers need to be made aware of the advantages of various error correction strategies so as to engage their students in a range of error correction activities.

**Table 4: NTDH teachers' views toward different error correction techniques**

| Teachers' perceptions of their error feedback | % of teachers |              |          |
|---|---------------|--------------|----------|
|   | Elementary    | Intermediate | Advanced |
| Indication + Correction + Categorization      | 0             | 13           | 20       |
| Indication + Correction                       | 100           | 95           | 78       |
| Indication + Categorization                   | 0             | 21           | 33       |
| Indication                                    | 0             | 43           | 85       |
| Hint at the location + Categorization         | 0             | 11           | 31       |
| Hint at the location                          | 0             | 0            | 17       |

Although there were a few differences between the preferences of TDH and NTDH teachers regarding the techniques for error correction, it was found that the same factors influenced their actual practices in the classrooms. When teachers were asked about the factors that affected their error feedback techniques, as with the results of Lee's (2003) study, perception of learners' specific needs was found to have the greatest impact on their error correction techniques (TDHTs= 77%, NTDHTs= 83%). One of the teachers put it, "when I feel my students can correct the errors alone, I just underline the errors. [But] when too many of them have the same problem, I try to correct the errors and sometimes write them on the board". Time was also an important factor for teachers' error correction strategies (TDHTs= 68%, NTDHTs= 71%). Some teachers said when they are short of



time, they simply underline the errors and ask students to go back to teachers if they have difficulty correcting their errors on their own. The data indicate that teachers usually do not decide on how to provide WCF based on learners' request (TDHTs= 29%, NTDHTs= 20%). In general, most teachers believed it is their responsibility to choose the best strategy based on the proficiency level of the students and the purpose of the error correction.

From the responses to a question exploring what teachers usually do after they have provided WCF (see question 8, section 2 in Appendix A), it was found that all teachers believe WCF should be followed by some activities to help learners make the most of it. As seen in Table 5, the most favorite follow-up activities were making the students revise their writing out of the classroom (TDHTs = 91%, NTDHTs = 85%) as well as reviewing learners' common errors by the teacher in the classroom (TDHTs= 68%, NTDHTs= 64%). As with previous studies, other follow-up techniques were given less attention (e.g., Lee, 2003; 2004). Although "holding a conference with the students" and "making students keep track of their frequent errors in an error log" were not favored by the participants, TDH teachers showed more interest in applying them in the class (TDHTs = 19%, 23%; NTDHTs = 8%, 2 %, respectively). The findings of the interviews revealed that rather than having a negative view toward the efficacy of these follow-up techniques, teachers were mostly concerned about the practicality of applying them in large classes given the limited amount of time available. Nonetheless, TDH teachers attached more importance to follow-up activities than their counterparts. One of them even maintained, "without helping students understand the errors, correction is useless".

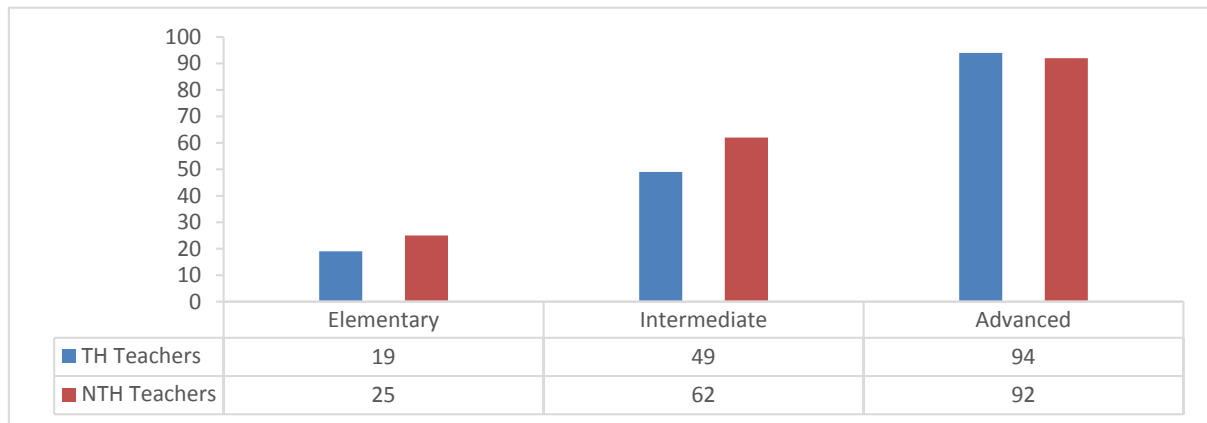
**Table 5: Teachers' follow-up techniques for WCF**

| What teachers do after they have marked students' compositions                | % of teachers |               |
|---|---------------|---------------|
|   | TDH Teachers  | NTDH Teachers |
| I hold a conference with the students.  |               |               |
| Some of them  | 19            | 8             |
| All of them   | 0             | 0             |
| I make students correct the errors.   |               |               |
| In the class  | 9             | 13            |
| Out of the class  | 91            | 85            |
| I make students record their errors in an error log or error frequency chart. | 23            | 2             |
| I go through students' common errors in the class.                            | 68            | 64            |

The questionnaire also elicited teachers' views about how often WCF is effective at different proficiency levels (see question 9, section 2 in Appendix A). As demonstrated in Figure 3, while teachers believe WCF is occasionally effective at the elementary level (TDHTs= 19%, NTDHTs= 25%), they consider WCF highly effective in helping advanced students improve their grammatical accuracy (TDHTs= 94%, NTDHTs= 92%). In teachers' perspectives, as students become more proficient in the target language, they can benefit more from the given WCF. The data obtained from the questionnaire (see question 1 & 9, section 2 in Appendix A) reveal that there is a relationship between teachers' views about how often WCF is effective and their beliefs about optimal amount of WCF at different proficiency levels. The lower the expected effectiveness of WCF for learners of a specific proficiency level, the more selective the WCF provided by the teachers. This relationship is evident in a statement made by a TDH teacher, "Usually when I give feedback, elementary students can't learn all the grammatical rules, [so] I only correct some of the

errors". In fact, in order to make the provided WCF more effective, teachers provide selective feedback at lower proficiency levels.

During follow-up interviews, one of the NTDH teachers stated that, "At elementary levels, I sometimes mark my students' errors even though I am not sure if it helps them learn their errors. I only do it to show them I care about them and they have to try more". This statement reveals that for some teachers reducing the number of learners' errors is not the only purpose of error correction and they may mark learners' errors even if they think it is not effective. Lee (2009) also reports that teachers provide WCF even though most of them believe learners will commit the same errors over and over again, and their effort does not pay off.



**Figure 3: Teachers' views on overall effectiveness of WCF at different proficiency levels**

The last question explored how often teachers get to practice what they really believe in the classroom (see question 10, section 2 in Appendix A). It was found that teachers have serious difficulty putting their thoughts into practice (TDHTs= 57%, NTDHTs= 66%). As with previous studies (Lee, 2003, 2008), the findings indicate that most teachers have to deal with time constraints for both providing WCF and reviewing targeted errors through follow-up techniques. Another difficulty which influences teachers' practices was found to be their lack of motivation. Since providing WCF is a cumbersome task for teachers, they become unmotivated to put much time and effort into it as learners commit the same errors over and over again even though these errors have been already addressed. One problem shared by TDH teachers was that although they sometimes prefer selective error correction, students' expectations and requirements of ELT departments make it difficult for them to put their beliefs into practice. Similarly, in Lee's (2008) study, most teachers said learners' expectations and English panel's requirements were the reasons why they were inclined to provide comprehensive WCF. Lee (2009) also concludes even though teachers prefer selective error correction, they provide comprehensive WCF in practice. Although teachers justify their tendency to provide comprehensive error correction by putting the blame on learners who expect teachers to correct all of their errors, as Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) argued, many of the students' expectations and preferences stem from their previous experiences in language classrooms. If teachers intend to change students' expectations, they have to change their own beliefs and practices first as learners' preferences form as a result of teachers' actual practices. Therefore, if teachers start to provide selective WCF, after a while, learners' expectations will change.

In the follow-up interviews, it was found that since one-on-one conferences are not practical in large classes, one common technique teachers use to deal with time constraints and workload of error correction is to figure out learners' common errors and address them in class discussions. In

this way, error correction will be automatically more selective and systematic, and all students have the opportunity to discuss the targeted errors.

### **Conclusions**

This study intended to investigate TDH and NTDH teachers' attitudes toward WCF as well as their problems in putting their beliefs into practice. A questionnaire and a follow-up interview were employed to elicit qualitative data regarding teachers' preferences and challenges in writing classes. Although both groups agreed that it is one of the most important responsibilities of language teachers to provide WCF, some differences were found in their preferences for optimal error correction. NTDH teachers had a tendency to provide direct and comprehensive CF, and compared with TDH teachers, used a limited range of error correction techniques. As SLA research suggests, selective WCF tends to be more effective, and given each technique of error correction has its own advantages and disadvantages in a given context, it is concluded that NTDH teachers need to become more familiar with the merits and demerits of different types of WCF as well as SLA theories for grammar instruction. From teachers' complaints about classroom constraints for providing WCF, it is also concluded that future SLA studies need to focus more on practical issues of feedback provision.

### **Limitations and Need for Further Research**

Acknowledging the significance of teacher characteristics in the attitudes of language instructors toward written error correction, the present study explored whether and how holding a TEFL degree influences teachers' perspectives on error treatment in L2 writing classes. Although the findings of this study have some implications to consider, it is important to outline its limitations. Firstly, due to the small sample size of the language teachers, the results of this study should be generalized with some skepticism. Secondly, the findings are only based on what teachers think they do in writing classes (i.e. self-reports). How teachers really provide WCF in the classroom context, however, is not explored. As revealed by the results of the present study, teachers are faced with a number of difficulties in order to practice what they believe. Therefore, further research could explore how teachers go about error correction in real classroom contexts through classroom observation and analysis of their actual written error correction practices.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A. Teacher Questionnaire****Section 1: Participant Information***Please circle the appropriate answers.*

1. What is your Gender? Male / Female
2. Do you have a degree in TEFL? Yes / No      BA / MA / PhD
3. Which of the following courses have you passed? CELTA / DELTA
4. How many years have you been teaching English for general purposes?  
Less than 3 years / 3 to 6 years / Over 6 years

**Section 2: Questions on Teachers' Beliefs about Written Corrective Feedback***Please circle the appropriate answers according to the instructions.*

8. Which of the following best describes your existing written error correction practice? Check the box for the appropriate proficiency level.
  - a) I don't mark students' errors in writing.  
Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
  - b) I mark students' errors selectively.  
Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
  - c) I mark all students' errors.  
Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
  - **If your answer to question 1 is "a" for all proficiency levels, you don't need to answer the following questions.**
  - **If your answer to question 1 is "b" for any proficiency level, answer questions 2 and 3. If not, go to question 4.**
9. Check the amount of errors you usually mark.  
About 1/3  About 2/3  More than 2/3
10. Which of the following is among the principles for your error selection? You can check more than one.
  - a) The selected errors are directly linked to grammar instruction in class (e.g., After I have taught subject-verb agreement, I provide feedback on subject-verb agreement errors.)
  - b) The selected errors are related to students' specific needs (e.g., Knowing that students are particularly weak in articles, I provide feedback on article errors.)
  - c) The errors are selected on an ad hoc basis (i.e., I decide what errors to correct while I am marking.)
  - d) Others.....
11. Who do you think should be responsible for correcting learners' grammatical errors?

a) Teachers

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

b) Classmates

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

c) Learners themselves

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

12. Do you use a marking code for providing written corrective feedback? If yes, check the box for any proficiency level at which you use a marking code.  
Yes  / No  Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
13. Do you use the following error correction techniques while providing your students with written corrective feedback? If yes, check the box for any proficiency level at which you use the technique.
- a) I indicate (underline/circle) errors, correct them, and categorize them with the help of a marking code (e.g., has ~~went~~ gone [verb form]).  
Yes / No Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
- b) I indicate (underline/circle) errors and correct them (e.g., has ~~went~~ gone).  
Yes / No Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
- c) I indicate (underline/circle) errors and categorize them (e.g., has went [verb form]).  
Yes / No Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
- d) I indicate (underline/circle) errors and but I don't correct them (e.g., has went).  
Yes / No Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
- e) I hint at the location of errors by putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line and categorize them (e.g., writing "prep" in the margin to indicate a preposition error on a specific line).  
Yes / No Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
- f) I only hint at the location of errors by putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line.  
Yes / No Elementary  Intermediate  Advanced
14. What factor(s) influence the error feedback technique(s) you usually use in a real classroom context? Circle the appropriate answer.
- a) Students' requests (i.e., students ask for it or them). Yes / No
- b) My perception of students' needs. Yes / No
- c) The amount of time I have. Yes / No
- d) Others.....
15. What do you usually do after you have marked students' compositions?
- a) I don't do anything.
- b) I hold a conference with the students. Some of them  / All of them
- c) I make students correct the errors. In the class  / Out of the class
- d) I make students record their errors in an error log or error frequency chart.
- e) I go through students' common errors in the class.
- f) Others.....
16. How often do you think written error correction is effective in helping learners improve their grammatical accuracy at different proficiency levels?
- a) Elementary level:

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

b) Intermediate level:

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

c) Advanced level:

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

10. How often can you practice what you believe in your classes?

|                  |                  |                    |                       |                     |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Always<br>(100%) | Usually<br>(80%) | Sometimes<br>(50%) | Occasionally<br>(20%) | Ineffective<br>(0%) |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|

- Which of the following is among the limitations that impede you from practicing what you believe in your classes? You can check more than one.
  - Lack of time
  - Large number of students
  - Written error correction is usually disregarded by students.
  - My own lack of motivation
  - Too much error correction demotivates learners of English for general purposes.
  - Too much written error correction causes students to avoid using the addressed structures in their future writing assignments.
  - I advocate learner autonomy and too much written error correction results in teacher-dependent students.

### Appendix B. Interview Guide

1. Do you think it is a good idea to provide language learners with written corrective feedback? Explain your answer.
2. Are you in favor of comprehensive or selective error correction? Why? Explain your answer.
3. Who should be responsible for error correction? Why?
4. Do you think providing each and every student with written corrective feedback is a must in writing activities? Explain your answer.
5. Do you use error codes? Why or why not? What problems, if any, can you see in using error codes? How can the problems be solved?
6. What techniques do you usually use for correcting learners' written errors? Do you prefer to provide your students with the correct form or simply underline the erroneous production?
7. What factor(s) influence the error feedback technique(s) you usually use? Explain your answer.
8. Does level of proficiency affect how much language learners can benefit from WCF?
9. What concerns or problems, if any, do you have in correcting student errors in writing?
10. What other technique(s), if any, do you use alongside or instead of written corrective feedback when you are faced with learners' written grammatical errors?