

# The Role of Contextual and Individual Factors in Shaping Instructors' Approaches to Written Corrective Feedback in EFL Settings

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## Abstract

The present study investigates the behavior of EFL lecturers in relation to written corrective feedback (WCF) and the individual and contextual factors that influence this behavior. To answer the research questions, six lectures from the Department of English Language and Literature were interviewed and their WCF behavior was examined. The results showed that lectures applied a variety of feedback tactics to students' written work, including direct and indirect WCF, unfocused WCF, supplementary oral corrective feedback (OCF), and the use of positive comments and suggestions. Contextual factors such as the student's language level, the type of error the student made, the curriculum, the instructional context (i.e., EFL), the students' preferences, the lecture's teaching load, class size, time constraints, culture, and the student's psychology influenced the decision to use one method or another. In addition, the data revealed that personal characteristics influenced lectures' use of WCF. Examples include the teacher's personality, teaching experience and training courses, and personal experience with feedback as a student. Moreover, the findings showed that there are some challenges that could complicate feedback provision. These include some personal characteristics of the instructors, such as impatience, while others are related to the students, such as illegible handwriting, sensitivity, and carelessness.

**Keywords:** EFL, feedback, WCF, writing, culture

## 1. Introduction

Feedback is an essential part of language teaching (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Moreover, it is a basic component of language learning and particularly of learning writing skills (Hyland, 2003). It enables teachers to provide information about the accuracy of students' products and to raise awareness of certain areas of second language learning that require their attention (Kartchava, 2016). Feedback not only identifies students' flaws and gives ways for dealing with them, but it also seeks to discover and improve students' strengths (Dabboub, 2019). Therefore, feedback is a common practice of teachers in second language learning classrooms (Wang & Jiang, 2014).

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in the importance of written Corrective Feedback (WCF) in foreign/second language learning (Rajab et al., 2016). Additionally, some studies explored the different types of WCF. Ferris (2006) points out that there are two kinds of WCF; namely: direct and indirect. Direct feedback can be defined as "the provision of the correct linguistic form by the teacher to the student" (Ferris, 2006, p. 83), while indirect feedback "occurs when the teacher indicates in some way that an error has been made – by means of an underline, circle, code or other mark" (Ferris, 2006, p. 83).

Numerous studies have explored the impact of diverse kinds of WCF on different areas of students' writing skills (e.g., Bitchener, 2008). Despite that fact that WCF, as a crucial part of writing classrooms, has attracted significant attention (Saeli, 2016), little is known about the factors that shape teachers' WCF practices (Mulati et al., 2018). Yet, some research does suggest that individual and contextual factors might have important roles in teachers' giving of feedback (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). Further investigation of these factors may explain why certain types of WCF are effective in some situations but ineffective in others (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010). Hyland (2013) indicates that writing skills are vital for English as a foreign language (EFL) learning and for students' professional academic careers. Teachers use various methods in teaching writing skills and different strategies in responding to students' compositions. Among such strategies, WCF is a very common practice in EFL writing courses (Wulf, 2021). WCF is often regarded to increase students' writing accuracy (Chandler, 2003). As a result, writing teachers consider providing their students with useful WCF for their texts as one of their primary duties (Al-Bakri, 2016).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Feedback and Foreign/Second Language Learning

Feedback can be defined as the responses teachers give to students' performances to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to correct their errors, and to provide them with the knowledge they need about the target language (Dabboub, 2019). Feedback is a basic

component of language learning and particularly of learning writing skills (Hyland 2003). It enables teachers to provide information about the accuracy of students' products and to raise awareness of certain areas of second language learning that require their attention (Kartchava, 2016).

Some theories of second language acquisition (SLA) support the role of feedback in language learning (Wang & Jiang, 2014). For example, according to the noticing hypothesis, "people learn about the things that they pay attention to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (Schmidt, 2001, p. 721). Therefore, feedback has a positive effect on SLA (Wang & Jang, 2014), since it draws students' attention to the correct forms (Gass, 2017), helping them to notice the gap between the language they produce and the target language (Schmidt, 2001) and then to restructure their interlanguage (Gass, 2017).

Similarly, from the interactionist perspective, through interaction, teachers must draw their students' attention to the formal aspects of the target language (Long, 1996). According to the interaction hypothesis, learning occurs when students are exposed to the target language (input), produce the language (output), and receive feedback during the interaction (Ishak, 2017) through interactional responses such as confirmation of understanding the message, clarification requests, and comprehension checks, which are known as meaning negotiation (Lyster, 2001). Drawing students' attention to their errors during these interactions can be a starting point to help them revise their previous knowledge and acquire new knowledge (Teye, 2019).

### 2.2 Scope of WCF

WCF can either be unfocused (comprehensive), in which case all or most of the errors are corrected, or focused (selective), in which case only one or two types of error are corrected (Roshan, 2017). According to Sheen (2007), focused feedback contributes more to the development of students' writing accuracy, because dealing with several linguistic features (i.e., unfocused feedback) may produce a cognitive overload, which prohibits the processing of feedback. In contrast, Ferris (2010) argued that correcting several errors at a time is more beneficial, since the goal of providing feedback to improve students' grammatical accuracy in general rather than just their use of some grammatical features.

### 2.3 Teachers' Perceptions, Preferences and Practices Regarding WCF

Although it is a demanding task, many teachers feel that they must correct their students' writing for several reasons. Rotim (2015) claimed that teachers correct students' texts to justify the marks they give. According to Alshahrani (2014), writing teachers believe that they need to correct errors as a response to students' efforts, to assist them in improving their writing skills, and to justify the grade they give for assignments. In addition, teachers value WCF because they believe it improves students' grammatical accuracy (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010).

In the same vein, Cheng and Zhang (2021) investigated the WCF practices of eight English instructors in the Chinese context. The participants included four native speakers of English and four non-native English speakers. The study found that both groups of instructors provided WCF of a similar type and scope. Both native and non-native English-speaking instructors provided unfocused WCF, and both groups employed direct and indirect strategies. However, the two groups focused on different types of errors; native English speakers focused more on global issues (i.e., organization and content), while the non-native speakers were more concerned with mechanics.

Similarly, Hidayah et al. (2021) examined the WCF beliefs and practices of two EFL teachers at a high school in Indonesia. The teachers in this study provided three types of WCF: direct, indirect, and metalinguistic. Their WCF was unfocused and covered all aspects (vocabulary, grammar, content, organization, and mechanics); however, the two teachers focused on different aspects. Some of teachers' beliefs aligned with their practices, while others were incongruous. The misalignments between the teachers' beliefs and practices can be attributed to contextual factors, such as time constraints, workload, and students' proficiency level. In addition, the teachers' own learning and teaching experiences may affect their practices.

### 2.4 Factors that Influence Teachers' WCF Practices

Previous research has identified individual and contextual factors that affect WCF practices. Individual factors may include the teachers' goals and beliefs, their learning, and their teaching experience (Alhojailan, 2019), while contextual factors may include the type of writing assignments, Ministry of Education assessment policies, the students' proficiency levels, the students' expectations, and the type of errors they make (Abou Eissa, 2010).

For example, Al-Bakri (2016) investigated teachers' beliefs regarding WCF, the reasons behind their WCF practices, and the problems they face in providing feedback. The study found that their WCF practices were influenced by their beliefs, which in turn were shaped by their teaching experience and personal learning. In addition, the study showed that contextual factors such as workload, time constraints, fatigue, emotional factors (e.g., feeling discouraged or disappointed because of the students' lack of appreciation for the teachers' efforts), and the students' attitudes and motivation influence teachers' WCF practices.

In another study, Jamoom (2016) explored 21 EFL teachers' WCF beliefs and practices in writing classrooms in a Libyan university, focusing on the factors that shape their beliefs and practices. The study revealed a number of factors that affect teachers' practices, including individual factors (teachers' knowledge, training, and experience with feedback as students and as teachers), contextual factors (classroom size, time of the writing classes, availability of resources), student factors (students' needs, preferences, and proficiency levels), and pedagogical reasons (increasing students' engagement with the feedback and ensuring students' understanding of the

feedback).

Wei and Cao (2020) examined the WCF strategies of 254 EFL lecturers at universities in China, Vietnam, and Thailand. The findings revealed that the lecturers used different strategies to provide feedback on students' writing. Individual and contextual factors impacted lecturers' feedback provision, including instructors' prior learning experiences and training, beliefs about language development, and perception of students' proficiency levels and metalinguistic knowledge, as well as time constraints and cultural influences.

Soleimani and Rahimi (2021) explored the (mis)alignment of three Iranian EFL teachers' WCF beliefs and practices. The findings revealed that the teachers' beliefs matched their practices regarding the types of errors targeted in feedback. However, their beliefs were incongruous with their practices regarding the type of WCF used and the scope of WCF. This misalignment between teachers' beliefs and practices was attributed to several factors, including students' expectations, a lack of training in feedback provision, a tendency to imitate colleagues' and professors' practices, and the Iranian instructional context, where teachers are viewed as the only source of information.

In same vein, Goldouz and Baleghizadeh (2021) investigated the tensions between WCF beliefs and practices of two novice and two experienced Iranian EFL instructors. The findings showed that there were fewer tensions between the novice teachers' stated beliefs and practices; however, a clearer tension was observed between the experienced teachers' beliefs and practices. Several factors may account for this tension, including students' (in)ability to self-correct errors, the difficulty of writing tasks, students' expectations, the frequency of errors, syllabus, and class size.

### *2.5 Teachers' WCF in the Saudi Context*

Although WCF has received much attention worldwide within the last three decades, this area is still under-researched in the Saudi context (Rajab, 2018). However, the studies that have been conducted have mainly explored teachers' and students' preferences and perceptions regarding WCF (e.g., Alkhatib, 2015; Alshahrani & Storch, 2014; Rajab, 2018).

Alshahrani and Storch (2014), for example, conducted a study to investigate teachers' practices and beliefs regarding different types of WCF. The study concluded that the teachers preferred unfocused feedback. Furthermore, the teachers' feedback concentrated on mechanics (i.e., errors in punctuation, spelling, and capitalization).

To investigate another area in WCF in the Saudi context, Alkhatib (2015) examined the relationship between EFL instructors' WCF beliefs and practices and the factors that cause a gap between their beliefs and practices at the University of Dammam. The study found that the instructors' practices were congruent with their beliefs in terms of their focus and the amount of WCF they gave. However, their beliefs were incongruent regarding their use of positive comments and the explicitness of their WCF. Factors such as the students' proficiency levels, the university context, and their teaching experience all affected the instructors' WCF practices.

An interesting area of WCF research that has attracted considerable attention is teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and preferences regarding written feedback (e.g., Alshahrani & Storch, 2014; Rajab, 2018). However, the reasons for these attitudes, perceptions and preferences have not yet been sufficiently researched. Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum and Wolfersberger (2010) claim that it is significant to study instructional and situational variables in WCF research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the research outcomes. Additionally, since there are some studies that focused on examining WCF behaviors of EFL students and the individual and contextual factors that shape them (e.g., Alkhalaf & Alhojailan, 2024), the current study aims to focus on the impact of contextual and individual factors on instructors' practices in providing WCF in EFL settings.

WCF research in the Saudi context has primarily focused on teachers' perceptions and preferences concerning WCF and the effectiveness of various kinds of feedback (e.g., Rajab, 2018). The purpose of the present study was not only to explore instructors' WCF practices but also to investigate the connections between these practices and a range of individual and contextual factors that may influence them. Research suggests that it is necessary to understand teachers' cognition (i.e., their beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge) and personal factors (e.g., teaching experience, training, and goals) to understand their teaching practices (Borg, 2006) and consequently to take the actions necessary to improve them (Cao, 2017).

The study was seeking to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the strategies followed by EFL instructors in responding to students' writing at a Saudi university?

RQ2: What are the individual and contextual factors that shape EFL instructors' written corrective feedback practices?

### **3. Methodology**

For the purpose of answering the research questions of the current study, semi-structured, online, one-on-one interviews were conducted to investigate WCF practices and what shapes those practices. This type of interview allows the participants the freedom to explain their ideas and opinions in a relaxed manner, which would be nearly impossible using a questionnaire (Rajab, 2018). Additionally, the semi-structured interview is interactive and enables the researcher to elicit additional information when the interviewees' initial answers are unclear, imprecise, or incomplete (Dörnyei, 2007). The questions that guided the interviews were adopted from previous studies (Al-Bakri, 2016; Alkhatib, 2015; Jamoom, 2016).

The participants were six EFL instructors who were currently teaching or had previously taught an EFL writing course at a Saudi university. All these participants had a BA degree, an MA degree, or a PhD degree in applied linguistics, translation, or English literature. They had taught a range of writing courses. All the participants were female and non-native speakers of English. They had diverse lengths

of teaching experience, ranging from two years to 18 years, and they had taught students of different proficiency levels. They were of different nationalities, which may have also contributed to their individual differences (e.g., culture, academic background, and second language learning experience). Table 1 provides some background information about the instructors.

Table 1. Background Information About the Instructors

Name	Nationality	Degree	Years of experience	Writing courses taught
<b>Tala</b>	Indian	PhD in English literature	10	ICP Writing Writing 1 Writing 3
<b>Layan</b>	Saudi	PhD in applied linguistics	4	Writing 2
<b>Ghadeer</b>	Sudanese	MA in applied linguistics	18	ICP Writing Writing 1 Writing 2 Writing 3
<b>Rama</b>	Indian	PhD in English literature + CELTA + BEC	12	Writing 1 Writing 3
<b>Asrar</b>	Yemeni	PhD in English literature	15	Writing 1 Writing 2 Writing 3
<b>Wasan</b>	Saudi	BA in translation	2	ICP Writing

Creswell (2013) points out that qualitative data analysis includes “preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (p. 180). As a result, the interviews' data were processed for analysis and arranged into themes to make them more meaningful. In addition, thematic analysis, a technique for analyzing qualitative data, was applied.

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1 Instructors' Strategies for Feedback on Students' Writing: The Role of Individual and Contextual Factors

###### a. Types of WCF

All participants reported that they do not adopt a single approach in providing WCF. They rather employ both direct and indirect WCF based on a number of factors, with the type of error being a crucial determinant in the selection. Errors in spelling or vocabulary usage are directly corrected, whereas errors in grammar or formatting are indirectly corrected.

Moreover, one of the participants referred to the curriculum as a factor that affects her WCF choices. Issues that are covered in class, on one hand, are indirectly corrected with the aim of reminding the students what they have already studied. On the other hand, topics they have not encountered in class are directly corrected.

In addition to the type of error and the curriculum, Asrar, one of the participants, uses her knowledge of the students' proficiency level, what errors are common for this specific level, and what errors might or might not be clear for the students, when deciding whether to correct the error directly or indirectly. She pointed out that her feedback to students of level 1 and 2 (beginners) differs from that to Research Methodology students at level 8 (advanced). According to Asrar, the student's proficiency level is an important factor in determining which approach of WCF to use. Direct feedback can be used with beginners, while indirect feedback is more suitable for advanced students.

Another participant, Tala, reveals that the instructor takes into consideration the psychology of the students as an important factor when providing WCF. According to Tala, since correcting or highlighting many mistakes demotivates or discourages the students, indirect feedback might be more useful. Furthermore, this type of feedback can prove to be more beneficial since it has permanent effects through the students' own discovery of their errors and consequent rectification.

Another factor that affects the instructors' WCF practices is the instructional context in which English is a foreign or a second language in the country. According to Tala, ESL students are more capable of correcting the errors themselves, consequently, indirect feedback is appropriate for them. However, EFL students, based on Tala's statement, may need more guidance, meaning that direct or a mixture of both direct and indirect feedback might be more suitable for them.

Another factor listed by the participants which affects the amount and the type of feedback is the students' individual preferences. Some

students, for example, like to be given all the details about mistakes. But some students do not like that. Moreover, some students do not like red pen, while others like their errors to be specified.

Moreover, Layan, another participant, adds two major factors that influence her WCF practices, which are time constraints and the size of the class. Asrar also agrees with Layan that time constraints, the number of students, as well as teaching load affect the strategies of providing feedback. However, she believes that it is the responsibility of the instructor to adjust the feedback in response to these factors.

**b.Scope of WCF**

Concerning the focus of instructors’ feedback, the participants said they mostly correct or highlight all the errors the students make. However, they may pay more attention to certain issues based on the students’ proficiency level or the curriculum.

The reason for applying unfocused feedback according to the participants is that all errors must be highlighted to develop students’ writing skills. Even though the instructors try to highlight all the errors, the degree of focus on certain issues may vary based on the proficiency level of the students. The instructors may focus more on certain types of errors for beginners and other types of errors for advanced students. Additionally, some participants mentioned that they tailor their feedback based on the individual students’ proficiency level and not only based on their academic level (for example, level 1 versus level 4).

The focus of the feedback may also differ based on the curriculum itself. The instructors pay more attention to issues covered in the curriculum, for example, the usage of certain expressions learned from the textbook.

Layan points out that although she highlights all the errors, she focuses more on issues related to the coherence, the unity, and the structure of the essay because she believes this should be the focus of a writing class rather than grammatical issues.

**c. Written Comments**

Generally, the participants believe that positive feedback is necessary to motivate and encourage the students and to appreciate their effort. They prefer suggestions over negative feedback to highlight and raise students’ awareness of specific issues in the text. For example, Tala pointed out that she starts with positive comments on the students’ effort and then moves to suggestions that highlight any issues in the text.

Unlike other participants, Wasan does provide negative comments in addition to positive ones but does not write suggestions for individual students. She justified her answer by saying that if the students receive only positive comments, they will think they are perfect and will not try to improve themselves, even though they need to.

Tala further stated that she chooses her words carefully when writing the comments to avoid discouraging the students, she tries to maintain a friendly manner in dealing with them, because the use of harsh language may result in hatred for the teacher and the course. Rama accentuated on the culture or the society in which the feedback is provided as an essential factor that could influence the instructor’s feedback. Rama thinks that Saudis are not used to giving or receiving negative feedback. As a result, she avoids giving negative comments to her students. Furthermore, she explained how a foreign instructor needs to study the culture of the students to be able to provide the appropriate type of feedback for them, taking into consideration the culture and the psychology of the students.

Table 2 provides a summary of the instructors’ feedback practices and the factors affecting them.

Table 2. A Summary of the Instructors’ Feedback Practices and the Factors Affecting Them

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Applied strategy</b>	<b>Factors that affect them</b>
The type of WCF	Both direct and indirect	Types of error Curriculum Students’ proficiency level Students’ preferences Time constraints Number of students Teaching load
The scope of WCF	Unfocused with varying degrees of focus depending on the issue	Instructional context (EFL) Psychology of the students Students’ proficiency level Curriculum
Written comments	Mostly a combination of positive comments and suggestions	Psychology of the students Culture

**d.Complementary OCF and WCF**

The analysis of the data shows that, in addition to providing WCF and written comments, the instructors also provide OCF (Oral Corrective Feedback), both collectively and individually. As for the collective feedback provision, OCF is given in class to emphasize common errors. The instructors also provide OCF individually to further clarify the errors of the students. Ghadeer adopts another strategy in providing OCF individually, as she takes the time to correct and explain the errors for the students, face to face, before writing the final draft.

**e.Challenges in WCF Provision**

There are challenges of feedback that writing instructors face. Some of these challenges are related to the instructors themselves. For example, Tala mentioned that losing her patience when repeating the instructions to students that failed to follow them is one of the most difficult challenges for her. In addition, Layan mentioned that having obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) makes grading written assignments difficult, as she struggles with being fair when assessing their performance.

Some challenges are related to students' characteristics, such as unclear handwriting that makes the process of correction harder for the instructor, according to Tala and Wasan. They linked the issue of students' unintelligible handwriting to the official school system. In this regard, Tala highlighted the need for more handwriting classes at school. Moreover, Ghadeer considers the sensitivity of the Saudi students toward the feedback as one of the difficult challenges she faces. Finally, Asrar referred to students' carelessness toward the feedback as the major challenge she faces.

#### f. Individual Factors Shaping Instructors' WCF Practices

The analysis of the qualitative data also reveals that some individual factors shape the instructors' WCF practices, these mainly being: teacher training courses, teaching experience, their feedback experience as students, and their personality and characteristics.

**Teacher Training Courses.** According to the participants, training courses are important in that they shape the instructors' WCF practices. Tala, for example, claimed that the training course she took influenced her feedback provision. According to Tala, she used to provide direct feedback. However, after taking a training course, she learned that this type of feedback discourages the students, so she started using indirect feedback.

**Teaching Experience.** In addition to teachers' training courses, most of the participants claimed that their teaching experience is a major factor that shapes their feedback practices. Throughout the years and through their experiences in dealing with students of different proficiency and contexts, the instructors may modify their feedback practices to the best suited for their students.

**Instructors' Feedback Experience as Students.** The way the participants provide feedback is also shaped by their own experience as students. They sometimes apply some of the strategies that their teachers employed and were beneficial for them. Ghadeer, for example, stated that she uses the way her teacher employed to encourage her.

**Instructor's Personality or Characteristics.** The personality or the characteristics of the instructors might affect their feedback provision. This is obvious in the case of Layan, who stated that she is sensitive, therefore, she tries to watch and be careful with the words that she tells the students all the time.

## 5. Discussion

The current study found that the instructors employ different strategies in responding to their students' compositions. The instructors' adoption of various strategies in correcting errors could be an indication of the tremendous effort they made to respond to the students' compositions and the many decisions involved in the process. It further shows that feedback provision is a complex process shaped by the instructors' personal factors and affected by different contextual variables that instructors need to consider to better achieve their goal of improving their students' writing skills.

These findings strongly support Storch's (2018) proposition that feedback should be dynamic and responsive to the students' abilities, needs, and performance. As Hyland and Hyland (2006) said, "feedback is not simply a disembodied reference to student text but an interactive part of the whole context of learning" (p. 86); this learning context includes the instructor, the student, and the physical and sociocultural context and the interactions between them. The findings are also consistent with Storch (2018), who proposed that from an activity theory perspective, feedback is a complex activity; its provision and response can be affected by a range of contextual and individual factors.

### 5.1 Employment of Direct and Indirect WCF

All the instructors in this study provide both types of WCF, direct and indirect in responding to their students' compositions. The use of one type or another is influenced by several factors, such as the students' proficiency level, their preference, the type of errors, the curriculum, the EFL instructional context, the psychology of the students, the time constraints, teaching load, and class size. Hence, certain determinants are crucial in deciding which type of feedback should be provided to the students, which in turn confirms the complexity of feedback as an activity influenced by the instructor, the students, and the context.

The present findings seem to be consistent with other conducted studies which reported the instructors' use of different types of feedback when correcting their students' texts. For example, Jamoom (2016) reported that the teachers used direct and indirect feedback to correct their students' errors. Their choice is affected by their students' proficiency level and is shaped by their feedback experience as students, their teaching experience, and their beliefs about the effectiveness of each strategy. Moreover, Hidayah et al. (2021) found that the participating teachers provided direct, indirect, and metalinguistic WCF. Factors such as time constraints and the number of students were of crucial importance to their WCF practices. Furthermore, Cheng and Zhang (2021) said that both native and nonnative English-speaking teachers combined both direct and indirect WCF, and their choice was moderated by the type of error the students made.

In the Saudi context, and corroborating this study, Alkhatib (2015) found that instructors employed both direct and indirect feedback strategies. They attributed their choices to many factors, such as the students' proficiency level, time constraints, the type of error, and the instructor's mood. In contrast, Alshahrani and Storch (2014) reported the instructors' use of indirect feedback following their institutional

guidelines, regardless of their preference for direct feedback, which again reflects the impact of contextual factors on feedback provision. Table 3 summarizes the types of WCF adopted and the factors affecting their adoption in the studies mentioned above.

Table 3. A Summary of the Types of WCF Adopted and the Factors Affecting Their Adoption in Previous Studies

The study	The adopted strategy	The factors affecting the adoption
Jamoom (2016)	Direct and indirect WCF, with direct feedback being used more often	1. Students' proficiency level 2. Instructors' feedback experience as students 3. Teaching experience 4. Instructors' beliefs about the effectiveness of each strategy
Hidayah et al. (2021)	Direct, indirect, and metalinguistic WCF	1. Time constraints 2. Number of students
Cheng and Zhang (2021) Alkhatib (2015)	Direct and indirect WCF Direct and indirect WCF	The type of error the student made 1. Students' proficiency level 2. Time constraints 3. The type of error the student made 4. The instructor's mood
Alshahrani and Storch (2014)	Indirect WCF	Institutional guidelines

### 5.2 Focus of WCF

The findings of this study indicate that instructors provide unfocused WCF, in which they try to correct all their students' errors. The instructors' adoption of this strategy can be explained by their belief that the students need to have all their errors corrected as soon as they are made and maybe by the instructors' feeling of responsibility to correct all the errors. These justifications originate from the Saudi culture where the instructor is seen as the sole source of knowledge. However, the instructors' degree of focus on certain issues in the text may vary based on their students' proficiency level and on the curriculum.

Several studies reported instructors' use of unfocused feedback when responding to the students' writing and the several factors that attributed to their decisions. Lee (2009), for example, found that teachers provide unfocused WCF because of exam pressure and school policy. In accordance with the present study, the majority of the instructors in Jamoom's (2016) study provide unfocused feedback as they believe it is their duty to correct all the students' errors to help them understand the errors and avoid repeating them in future texts. However, the instructors may elaborate on certain aspects of the text based on the course objectives, the instructor's beliefs about the writing, and their students' needs.

In contrast to the current research, the teachers in Soleimani and Rahimi (2021) believed that focused WCF is more effective as it results in a deeper understanding of the errors and less cognitive load, whereas correcting all the errors could be demotivating for the students. Nonetheless, in practice, they do correct all their students' errors. Some factors account for this mismatch between the teachers' beliefs and their practices. These include a lack of training in feedback provision, the tendency to follow colleagues or professors in providing unfocused feedback, the students' expectations, and the instructional context (i.e., EFL context) in which the instructors are expected to be the only source of information. Table 4 provides a summary of the adopted WCF strategy and the reasons behind its adoption in these studies.

Table 4. A Summary of the Adopted WCF Strategy and the Reasons Behind Its Adoption in Previous Studies

The study	The adopted strategy	The reasons behind the adoption
Lee (2009)	Unfocused WCF	Exam pressure and school policy
Al-Bakri (2016)	Unfocused WCF with more emphasis on errors related to form than issues of content or organization	Time constraints, workload, teacher fatigue, and students' motivation
Jamoom (2016)	Unfocused WCF with more emphasis on certain aspects of the text based on various factors	Course objectives, the instructor's beliefs about writing, and the students' needs
Cheng and Zhang (2021)	Unfocused WCF	Instructors' belief that it is their responsibility to correct all the students' errors
Soleimani and Rahimi (2021)	Unfocused WCF, regardless of their belief in the effectiveness of focused WCF	Lack of training in feedback provision, the tendency to imitate colleagues or professors in providing unfocused feedback, the students' expectations, and the instructional context

### 5.3 Combination of Positive Comments and Suggestions

All the instructors avoid negative comments because of their possible harmful psychological impact on the students. Wasan is the exception to this rule, as she writes negative as well as positive comments, and provides suggestions orally and collectively. There are three possible explanations for Wasan's different approach, each one reflecting the potential impact of certain factors on the instructor's

WCF provision.

Effect of Educational Background, Teaching Experience, and Training Courses. Wasan is the only participant holding just a BA degree, and she has the least teaching experience among the participants, with no previous preparation in language teaching or scientific background in education. Therefore, she may not understand student psychology and the possible harmful effect of negative comments.

Effect of the Curriculum. Wasan teaches a beginner writing skills course, where the writing tasks are simple and the students are only required to write a short paragraph for each assignment; thus, the errors they make and the criticism they receive may not be as serious as those in advanced writing courses.

Effect of the Instructor's Characteristics. As a young Saudi instructor (compared to the other instructors, she obtained her BA degree almost three years ago), Wasan understands Saudi students' psychology better than the other instructors and knows that when accompanied by positive comments, negative comments do not have a harmful impact. Hence, Wasan's different approach may reflect her better understanding of students' feelings, possibly due to her being closer in age and from the same cultural background as them. In contrast, the other instructors may be too careful in writing their comments because they think that Saudis are very sensitive to criticism.

The approach of combining praise, criticism, and suggestions received some support in the literature. For example, Bloom (1976) insisted that the teacher's comments must begin with praising the student's work, followed by identifying certain areas that require some improvement and ending with offering suggestions and directions for improvements and expressing confidence in the student's capability to overcome the issues.

Similarly, the teachers in Hyland and Hyland's (2001) study provide positive comments, negative comments, and suggestions to their students. The instructors' comments in the current study contradict those in Alkhatib (2015) and Lee (2009), who found that the instructors rarely praise their students' performance, and in Ferris et al. (1997), who noted that the teachers write positive comments only for highly proficient students and criticism for low-proficiency students. One possible justification for this different approach could be that the participants in the current study are significantly concerned about the psychological impact of their comments on the students' motivation and improvement. Recently, more emphasis has been given to students' emotions during the educational process (e.g., Bhuana & El Fauziah, 2021), which may lead instructors to moderate their criticism by highlighting positive aspects of students' writing and by being careful in their commentary.

#### 5.4 Complementary OCF

Collectively, OCF is used in the classroom to point out the common errors to the students. Individually, OCF is given to further clarify the errors for the students or to discuss certain issues in their writing. This reflects the instructors' willingness to employ different feedback modes to maximize the effectiveness of their WCF. Correspondingly, all the instructors in Yunus's (2020) study provided oral feedback in front of the class as a follow-up to their WCF to ensure that the students did not repeat their errors.

#### 5.5 Factors Complicating the Provision of WCF

Two instructors expressed their struggles due to the students' carelessness and their tendency to ignore the teacher's instructions. This reflects the impact of the students' negative attitudes and lack of interest in improving their writing skills on the instructor's emotional state and possibly on their WCF practices. Correspondingly, the instructors in Al-Bakri's (2016) study expressed their disappointment, discouragement, and loss of patience due to the majority of the students' lack of commitment to their learning. Hence, the students' lack of motivation and negative attitudes could be major challenges that instructors face in providing WCF that even affect their emotional state (Al-Bakri, 2016).

Another challenge reported in the current study was the students' illegible handwriting. The Saudi students' unclear handwriting, according to two participants, is a significant issue in writing class, and it can be linked to a lack of writing practice at the school level. Corroborating this, Alharbi (2021) found that Saudi students' illegible handwriting could be due to the lack of a specific course for handwriting at Saudi schools and to a lack of writing practice, especially because of the excessive use of technologies such as smartphones and laptops instead of handwriting.

#### 5.6 Factors Affecting the Quality and the Quantity of WCF

##### a. Context-Related Factors

Students' Proficiency Level. Some instructors may tailor their feedback practices based on individual students' proficiency levels. This can be justified by the beginners' potential inability to correct their own errors at the early stage and their need for more guidance to learn the correct forms.

Some earlier studies supported this approach. For example, Ellis (2009) found that direct feedback is especially effective with students with low proficiency levels who are incapable of correcting their own errors. In this case, as Van Beuningen et al. (2012) suggested, direct WCF can be used to provide clear, immediate, and precise information about the targeted forms, which ensures that the students have learned the correct forms, instead of indirect WCF, which may leave the students unsure whether their corrections are accurate and consequently may hinder the effectiveness of the feedback they receive.

Furthermore, the instructors' decision to provide more indirect feedback to advanced students can be explained by the students' ability to reflect on, analyze, and correct their own errors and the need to develop their self-editing skills at higher levels. In the same vein,



Bitchener and Ferris (2012) argued that students with high proficiency levels have greater metalinguistic knowledge, which enables them to better process certain kinds of WCF. By contrast, because of their limited existing knowledge, their limited cognitive capacity, and their low working memory, students with low proficiency levels may find it challenging to cognitively process WCF (AlHarrasi, 2019).

Moreover, the instructors may focus more on certain errors for the beginners and on other issues for the advanced-level students. This could be justified because the instructors are more concerned with the students mastering certain skills at specific levels. For example, they may pay more attention to grammatical errors or errors in vocabulary usage for beginners while focusing on skills such as style and rhetoric at advanced levels. Regarding the impact of proficiency level on the amount of WCF, Alkhatib (2015) proposed that focused feedback is more appropriate for beginners because it allows them to focus on specific issues, while unfocused feedback is more suited for advanced students who need to produce error-free texts. Alshahrani and Storch (2014), in contrast, claimed that unfocused WCF is especially appropriate for low-proficiency students who need all their errors to be highlighted.

Type of Errors. Some instructors correct some types of errors directly and other types indirectly. The rationale for this strategy could be that the students are capable of correcting certain errors (e.g., spelling and grammatical errors) by themselves; thus, indirect WCF would be sufficient to point out where the error occurred or what type of error it is. However, more advanced issues related to word choice, style, or rhetoric may require more direct feedback to enable the students to understand the issue and how to deal with it. This is in line with the findings of Ferris and Hedgcock's (2005) study, and in contrast with the findings of Van Beuningen et al.'s (2012) study who argued that direct feedback is more appropriate for rule-governed errors, whereas indirect feedback is more effective with non-rule-governed errors.

Curriculum. In terms of the scope or the focus of the feedback, the instructor, as Tala said, may pay more attention and elaborate more on the issues that are related to the curriculum or correspond with the course objectives since these might be the essential skills that the instructor hopes their students will master by the end of the semester. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated the role of the curriculum in shaping the instructors' WCF practices. For instance, Goldouz and Baleghizadeh (2021) found that the curriculum is one of the major contextual factors that shape instructors' instructional choices, including their provision of WCF. In the same vein, Jamoom (2016) reported that instructors' response to their students' texts is guided by the objectives of the writing course.

Instructional Context (EFL). According to Tala and Rama, the two Indian instructors in the study, English being a foreign language contributes to Saudi students' low proficiency and their lack of opportunity to practice the language outside the classroom. This issue results in their attitude that writing skills is a course to pass, not skills to master. Consequently, grades could be their main concern rather than improving their skills. This is in line with Alrabai (2017), who said that one of the challenges that EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia face is Saudi EFL learners' attitude of concentrating on passing a course instead of actual learning. This lack of intrinsic motivation is a major challenge that may prevent teachers from fulfilling their teaching goals (Shah et al., 2013) and may directly affect their practices.

University Policies. Overcrowded classes and heavy teaching loads decrease the amount of time the instructor has to provide WCF for each student. As a result, the instructor may adopt an approach that is suitable for the amount of time they have to correct students' texts. The same conclusion was reached by Goldouz and Baleghizadeh (2021), who reported that large classes were one of the reasons for the mismatch between teachers' WCF beliefs and practices. In contrast, the experienced instructors in Goldouz and Baleghizadeh's (2021) study preferred indirect negotiated feedback, but due to some factors among which were large classes, they provide direct, metalinguistic WCF.

Psychology of the Students. Students' emotions affect their learning, motivation, success, and satisfaction, and they therefore should not be overlooked in the provision of WCF because of its impact on their engagement and response to the feedback they receive (Azizi & Nemati, 2018). In harmony with this study, Bhuana and El Fauziah (2021) argued that instructors should determine the type as well as the amount of their feedback, taking the students' feelings into consideration; teachers need to be careful when correcting errors, as excessive corrections may have a negative effect on students' emotions and their motivation to learn and write.

Culture. One of the interesting findings of this study is that students' cultural background may shape the instructors' response to the students' compositions. Some of the instructors said that they avoid negative comments and provide positive comments with suggestions because of the sensitivity of Saudis toward criticism. This is the strategy that the instructors reported to follow in their written comments, which, according to Danielewicz-Betz and Mamidi (2009), follow the norms and conventions of the Saudi culture. Corroborating this study, Wei and Cao (2020) reported the impact of Thai culture on the ELF instructors' feedback strategies, as some of the instructors said that they provide indirect feedback as a face-saving strategy.

#### b. Individual Factors

Teaching Experience. The findings observed in this study mirror those of the previous studies that have examined the effect of teaching experience on feedback provision (e.g., Al-Bakri, 2016; Alkhatib, 2015; Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010; Jamoom, 2016). For example, in the study of Evans, Hartshorn, and Tuioti (2010), the 1023 instructors, who have teaching experience in a total of 69 countries, said that their personal teaching experience is the most influential personal factor shaping their feedback practices.

Teacher Training Courses. Training courses are important resources for equipping instructors with the knowledge they need about the best teaching practices and how to effectively implement them in their classes. Furthermore, training has an impact on feedback provision by helping instructors recognize what feedback strategies are most effective in a particular context and understanding the psychology of the students and how to account for it in feedback provision to better achieve their desired outcome. Lastly, training can contribute to the

instructor's self-confidence in their practices in two ways. First, when they discover that the practices they have already adopted are correct. Second, after the training, they have more confidence that they are doing the best for their students.

In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated the influence of teacher training on WCF provision (e.g., Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010; Jamoom, 2016; Soleimani & Rahimi, 2021; Wei & Cao, 2020). For example, like Tala, who said that her preference changed from direct to indirect WCF after training, Wei and Cao (2020) pointed out that professional training of EFL instructors was one of the influences that led them to adopt indirect feedback strategies.

**Instructors' Feedback Experiences as Students.** According to the participants, their feedback experience as students affects their WCF practices to some extent. They apply the strategies that they found useful and avoid those that were not effective. The instructors' personal language-learning experience was reported as one of the influential factors on feedback provision in some studies (e.g., Al-Bakri, 2016; Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010; Jamoom, 2016; Soleimani & Rahimi, 2021; Wei & Cao, 2020). For instance, Wei and Cao (2020) reported that language-learning experience was among the influential factors shaping EFL teachers' feedback practices.

**Instructor's Personality or Characteristics.** The study found that the instructor's personality or characteristics is one of the many factors that may have an impact on the instructor's WCF provision. For example, being sensitive led Layan, to be careful in the wording of her comments, and being a perfectionist led her to prefer providing detailed feedback. This is in accordance with Polk (2006), who argued that the teacher's personality traits could affect their performance.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary

Adopting a qualitative approach, six EFL writing instructors were interviewed to examine their WCF-related behaviors. The thematic analysis of the data revealed the following major findings:

- The instructors use various strategies, including direct and indirect WCF, unfocused WCF with varying degrees of attention depending on the issue, the provision of individual and collective OCF to clarify WCF, and the mixture of positive comments and suggestions.
- The contextual factors affecting the instructors' practices were the student's proficiency level, the type of error the student made, the curriculum, the instructional context (EFL), the students' preferences, the instructor's teaching load, the class size, time constraints, the culture, and the student's psychology. In addition, certain individual factors shaped the instructors' WCF behavior, such as their teaching experience, their experience as students, related training courses, and personality characteristics.
- Some challenges complicate feedback provision. These include some personal characteristics of the instructors, such as impatience, while others are related to the students, such as illegible handwriting, sensitivity, and carelessness.

Although the research provides valuable information about instructor WCF practices, it is crucial to keep in mind that feedback is a fluid process. Instructors must consistently review their methods, assess their impact, and explore changes to enhance their feedback abilities. Instructors should be given the freedom by institutions and curriculum planners to utilize strategies they deem most suitable for their particular circumstances.

Additionally, institutions need to recognize how their policies, like class size and teaching workload, affect both instructors' methods and students' learning. Improving instructors' performance is crucial by enhancing work and teaching conditions.

### 6.2 Recommendations

The findings suggest that, for the instructors to efficiently draw upon their accumulated experience, they need to reflect on their WCF practices regularly and evaluate the effectiveness and the modifications that could help them become better feedback providers. Additionally, the study suggests that the institutions or curriculum planners should give the instructors the freedom to adopt the strategies they believe to be effective in the context in which the feedback is provided. Moreover, the study stressed that the institutions should consider the impact of their policies (e.g., the class size and the teaching load) and contextual factors on their instructors' practices and consequently the students' learning and achievement. Better work and teaching conditions are necessary for the instructors to improve their performance.

### 6.3 Limitations

A major limitation in this study is that the number of participants was relatively small. The sample size tends to be small in qualitative research (Marshall, 1996). However, it does not permit the generalization of the findings on a worldwide scale and should be taken with caution (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Interviews with more participants may reveal more variations and factors that affect WCF-related behaviors.

One of the weaknesses of this study is the use of only one tool for data collection, i.e., the interview. The interview is an instrument that is suitable for the exploration of the participants' experiences, feelings, and behavior. However, the employment of a combination of data collection tools, such as textual analysis or the TAPs, may deepen our understanding of the phenomenon and provide data that either confirms the findings of the interviews or reveal contradictions between the participants' statements and their actual behavior.

Another important limitation lies in the fact that all the participants were female. Gender is an important factor that affects second language acquisition and language learning strategies (Zoghi et al., 2013). Interviews with male participants could provide more insight, enabling the comparison between male and female instructors and students and examining whether gender is an influential factor of WCF-related behavior.

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**Authors' contributions**

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Ahmad I Alhojailan: Visualization, Investigation, Supervision, Project administration, Writing - Review & Editing, Funding acquisition.

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