

Macao Secondary School EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Written Corrective Feedback: Rationales and Constraints

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Abstract: Corrective feedback on writing (WCF) has been one of the most controversial topics in ESL/EFL teaching. In the past decades, much has been disputed regarding the effectiveness and preferences of the quantity, focus, directness and source of WCF. With so much uncertainty, the researcher set out to investigate how research-informed secondary school teachers in Macao reported their beliefs, rationales, practices and constraints of administering corrective feedback for EFL writing in Macao secondary schools. Twelve secondary school teachers were recruited at a TESOL conference to conduct focus-group discussions. Similar to previous findings, results suggest teachers had clear rationales as to their ways of practising WCF. However, many expressed difficulties in acting according to rationales and beliefs. Despite their experience and knowledge, practical constraints such as school policies and teacher workload made it unlikely for them to follow their thoughts with feedback on writing. This study identified six sources of constraints that could prohibit practices and potentially reshape ones' beliefs, which sheds light on future directions of WCF research.

Key words: beliefs; practice; written corrective feedback; EFL teachers; error correction

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1. Introduction

Corrective feedback on writing (WCF) has been one of the most controversial topics in ESL/EFL teaching since Truscott (1996)'s study against the effectiveness of feedback and correction on L2 learners' writing. In the latest systematic review by Chong (2019), a total of 41 primary studies on WCF were identified in the two decades since 1997. However, contrasting views of WCF date back to as early as the 1960s. Ferris (2012) reviewed the timeline of the WCF research and identified 30 primary studies since 1967. Nearly every dimension of the topic had been debated, from how direct or obscure the WCF should be (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006), how focused or holistic it should be (Sheen et al., 2009; Sheppard, 1992), whether attention should be on the written language or content (Ferris, 2002; Heffernan et al., 2014; Truscott, 1999), to the effectiveness of peer feedback, group feedback or teacher conferencing (Bitchener et al., 2005; Rollinson, 2005). As can be seen, much effort has been put into investigating the effective methods of WCF. However, far less has been understood regarding how teachers decided on their methods of administering WCF when facing the lack of consensus of recommended pedagogic practices. So far, attempts have been made to examine the alignment between teacher beliefs and practices, and most found a high degree of mismatch between thinking and acting (e.g., Chapin & Terdal, 1990; Lee, 2008; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). However, most of these studies are descriptive in nature, with little focus on exploring what might be the causes of misalignment. Further, whether teachers involved in these studies were consciously aware of the different approaches of administering WCF, whether they possessed adequate knowledge pertaining to the theories and rationales behind the approaches were largely unknown. This study, therefore, aims to investigate how EFL teachers who are well-informed of the different WCF approaches make conscious decisions on their method of WCF administration. Secondary school EFL teachers who possess a postgraduate degree and take active part in understanding the findings in the academia were recruited to offer their beliefs and expound on their practices and concerns.

2. Approaches to Written Corrective Feedback

A search of the literature reveals four main foci of research on WCF: the quantity, focus, directness and source/channel of WCF. It was believed that too much WCF would be discouraging for students (Semke, 1984). However, Sheppard (1992) argued that holistic

WCF is better able to “increase a student’s awareness of sentence boundaries...” (p. 103), while Sheen et al. (2009) insisted that only WCF that focused on the target structures could improve accuracy in L2 writing. Relatedly, Ferris (2002) suggested that the focus of marking should not be the content but rather the language use. However, Truscott (1996, 1999, 2020) found the opposite, claiming that correction on grammar per se is not beneficial to L2 writing. Along this line, studies (e.g., Aquino & Cuello, 2020; Lee, 2008) reported that teachers believed content and organisation of ideas should be the focus on marking, but in actual practice, language has always been the focus.

In terms of the method of offering WCF, Chandler (2003) found that if teachers offer direct corrections to the errors, students can produce more and better corrective responses to the errors they made. As well, they can remember the correct forms better. However, evidence from Ferris (2006) suggested that indirect feedback by means of symbols and denotations can better guarantee improvements in writing in the long run. On the source of WCF, peer feedback has also been a topic of debate, as research (e.g., Zhang, 1995) indicated ESL students do not prefer peer feedback owing to a lack of confidence in its accuracy. However, others (e.g., Rollinson, 2005; Sato, 2013) found that peer feedback is conducive to L2 writing accuracy, among other collaborative benefits. Less controversial is the effect of teacher conferencing, with most researchers acknowledging its effectiveness in L2 writing accuracy over purely written feedback (Bitchener et al., 2005; Erlam et al., 2013; Shams-Abadi & Ahmadi, 2016; Walker, 2006; Wu & Lin, 2015).

Despite the varied views and findings, there is growing evidence that focused WCF offering explicit corrections is able to improve the accuracy of certain syntactic errors in L2 writing, such as verb tenses, prepositions and articles (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Farrokhi & Sattarpour, 2012; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). Interestingly, from the students’ perspective, holistic WCF is preferred over the focused form (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016; Han, 2017; Junqueira & Payant, 2015) likely due to learners’ belief that the more mistakes the teacher pointed out, the more they could benefit from the WCF.

3. Practitioners’ Beliefs and Practices

In a well-cited article of Lee (2008), which collected WCF from 26 secondary school teachers, interviewed 7, and surveyed 206 other teachers in Hong Kong, ten mismatches were found between practitioners’ beliefs and practices. Some misalignments that are relevant to the current study are:

- (1) Teachers predominantly only provide feedback to language use, while acknowledging that other aspects of writing should be paid attention to.
- (2) Teachers voiced preference over focused marking but tended to mark holistically.
- (3) Teachers believed students do not have the ability to make corrections based on the indirect denotations, but still largely employed codes and symbols.
- (4) Teachers understood the benefits of process writing, but only assigned single-draft writing and one-time feedback.
- (5) Teachers doubted the effectiveness of their current practice of feedback, but do not incline to change their method of feedback.

The identification of the belief-and-practice gaps is vital to our understanding of the existing phenomenon. However, not much was discussed regarding the reasons behind these misalignments. Lee (2008) felt sceptical as to whether there were actual explanations for the gaps but prompted further investigation into the underlying reasons behind the mismatches.

A relatively recent article by Mao and Crosthwaite (2019) found both alignment and misalignment between L2 teachers' beliefs and practices. Researchers recruited and requested five EFL English teachers working at a mid-tier college in mainland China to offer feedback to a total of 100 student compositions. After that, a survey and an interview were conducted with each of the teachers to discuss their beliefs and practices. Teachers generally expressed that they preferred explicit WCF. However, indirect WCF accounted for the majority of feedback forms in their marking. Yet, all teachers agreed that when giving indirect WCF, codes should be used instead of just highlighting the error. Similar to Lee's (2008) findings, teachers largely favoured WCF on content and organisation, but the actual proportion of feedback pertaining to language issues were much more than that on the "global" issues. Results regarding focused or unfocused WCF indicated that teachers favoured focus WCF, which mostly align with their actual practice. What is more interesting about Mao and Crosthwaite (2019) research is its discussion on teachers' practical constraints. They suspected that the alignments were only a result of practical situations such as the lack of time for teachers to offer comprehensive feedback and that students might not value their WCF.

It is beyond doubt that understanding teachers' classroom practices is vital to establishing a connection between research and practice, which is why related studies typically recruit front-line teachers as subjects. However, in these studies, how much the

teacher participants knew or cared about existing research findings is often unknown. Lee (2008) recruited secondary school teachers based on convenience, while only one of the teachers in Mao and Crosthwaite (2019) indicated a background in Applied Linguistics; two of the participants had never received training related to writing feedback. For various reasons, teaching practitioners are typically not interested in education research (Costello, 2011) and thus they are unlikely to be informed by scientific findings, not to mention the contradicting assertions in the strand of WCF could be highly confusing for practitioners. Therefore, it would be less of a surprise that teachers could not come up with clear rationales as to their WCF decisions (e.g., Lee, 2008). To the author's knowledge, research concerning WCF rationales of secondary school teachers who are interested in the latest research development is virtually non-existent. Thus, it is the attempt of the current study to provide some preliminary insights in this relatively blank area.

4. Research Questions

This study is interested in examining the beliefs, rationales, self-reported practices and concerns of WCF of Macao secondary level EFL teachers who genuinely care about research findings. Two overarching research questions are:

- (1) What are research-informed EFL teachers' beliefs and rationales of the administration of written corrective feedback?
- (2) Do EFL teachers think they can give written corrective feedback according to their beliefs and rationales? If not, why?

5. Methods

This study took on an exploratory research design adopting focus-group discussion as the method of investigation. Data were analysed qualitatively. Focus-group discussion has been widely adopted in sociology and marketing (Mishra, 2016). It has the advantages of mutual stimulation of thoughts from participants who share a homogeneous background, as well as obtaining a range of views or identifying norms of a certain interest group (Hennink, 2007).

5.1 Participants

Twelve Macao secondary school teachers (male= 4, female= 8; mean age= 29.5) having English education or applied linguistics education backgrounds were recruited at a TESOL conference held locally. These teachers had joined one of the writing corrective feedback sessions delivered by the researcher. In the session, the researcher inquired if the audience

who taught in local secondary schools were interested in taking part in a study and willing to leave their contact information. Then, the author contacted those who left their contact information. As a recruitment criterion, only teachers who had had at least three years of teaching experience were included. These teachers were verbally confirmed to be highly motivated in research and were eager to be informed of the latest research findings. They were properly informed of the nature of the study and signed their consent for it. The 12 EFL teachers were split into two focus groups, with six of them (male= 2, female= 4) coming from four Chinese-medium schools and the other six (male= 2, female= 4) from four other English-medium schools.

5.2 Data Collection Procedure

Following the four main foci of WCF research as stated above and adapting some of the interview questions of Lee (2008), the researcher designed ten questions that tap into the amount of feedback, the explicitness of the marking, the focus of the feedback as well as the source of feedback. A list of the questions can be found in Table 1. The questions were pilot tested with six university EFL teachers following the guidelines of Hennink et al. (2020) to ensure the clarity of the questions and that the research questions could answer the research questions.

The discussions were conducted in English. The researcher as a moderator of the discussion asked the questions, facilitated the discussion and occasionally induced in-depth elaboration of some participants' ideas. The discussion was recorded using two mobile devices. Notes regarding teachers' non-verbal aspects (e.g., emotions, tone of voice, gestures with special meaning) were taken during the discussion. At the start of the discussion, the teachers introduced themselves and the researcher asked a general question of teachers' "views on written corrective feedback" to warm up the group. Then, the nine core questions were asked. Teachers occasionally came up with interesting points that were not included in the questions, such as that the fact that WCF was mostly criticism rather than praise. The researcher would follow up on the point and ask if teachers praised students in the comments. Each question was expounded on until no significantly new information emerged. The discussion ended when all ten questions were adequately addressed.

Table 1. Questions for the focus-group discussion

Aspect	Questions
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Overall perception on WCF (opening)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are your views on written corrective feedback? Do you think it is helpful to students' improvements?
Quantity of WCF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you mark errors selectively or comprehensively? Why? ● Do you offer feedback in great details? Why?
Focus of WCF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What areas do you focus on in your written feedback? Why? ● Do you focus on giving feedback on the language or the content/organisation of writing? Why?
Explicitness of WCF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you think it is a good idea to provide corrections for student errors in writing? ● Do you use error codes? Why or why not?
Source of WCF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you agree that peer feedback can improve students' writing? Why? ● Do you give individual oral feedback to students? Why?
Practising WCF according to rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you offer feedback according to your beliefs and rationales? Why or why not?

5.3 Data Analysis and Reliability

The discussions were transcribed, coded, categorised and analysed as suggested by Strauss (1987) and using data analysis software NVivo 12. Themes were identified based on 1) the four main research areas of WCF as stated in Table 1, 2) other relevant ideas emerged in the discussion, 3) words or phrases related to perceptions, beliefs, understanding, rationales, suggestions and difficulties regarding the practice of WCF administration. To increase data reliability, the notes of the researcher were consulted during the coding. Then, the codes were revisited by the researcher one week after the initial coding and one month after the second time coding. There were no further changes in the third round of coding.

6. Findings

6.1 Overall Perception on WCF

Regarding the view of WCF, both groups of participants unanimously agree that feedback is important, necessary and useful (n= 12). Participants stated:

(1) Students need and want feedback

I think corrective feedback is essential because students can make better improvements if they understand their mistakes. Students would like to know about their mistakes in writing. (Teacher D)

- (2) Feedback is required by schools, and it is useful.

It is a requirement of my school to provide feedback for writing. I think it is very useful.

6.2 Beliefs and Rationales for Marking Selectively

Most teachers recommended marking selectively (n= 10). Important rationales include:

- (1) Not wanting to hurt students' feelings:

I think [students] will be so disappointed if they see their writing full of red marks. They don't want to see this actually. (Teacher A)

- (2) Selecting mistakes based on students' level:

It is not very necessary to mark all the mistakes, and as for the mistakes, I marked, I picked up some mistakes that is very...how to say...I imagine a form 3 student should not make this mistake, and I marked this kind of mistakes. So I just mark some typical mistakes. (Teacher F)

- (3) Selecting mistakes based on the frequency of appearance:

I just try to pick out errors that are repeated, a little bit. [Those] happen more than once. (Teacher H)

- (4) Selecting mistakes that will affect comprehension:

...just point out something like "earn hardly", things that change the meaning of the language. "Hardly to study" means you don't study. You got to point out those because they interfere with comprehension. (Teacher I)

- (5) Teachers should have a marking objective:

...if I am marking a piece of homework, there should be a certain language item that I should focus on. (Teacher D)

6.3 Beliefs and Rationales for Marking Comprehensively

Two teachers favoured marking comprehensively. Two major rationales were identified:

- (1) Students should have learning autonomy:

...my purpose for [marking comprehensively] is for [students] to later select which they would feel they would want to correct first on their own. (Teacher J)

- (2) Successful learning from WCF is a probability:

I mark most of the mistakes that I found because if [a student] just go[es] through the whole passage and can pick up 3 points, he is already very good. (Teacher C)

Teachers mostly agreed to giving feedback on particular aspects of writing. They believed students' feelings and proficiency level, the frequency and salience of the mistakes, as well as the purpose of the writing, should be considered.

6.4 Beliefs and Rationales for WCF Focusing on Language Use

More teachers agreed that WCF on both language and content/organisation is equally important (n= 7). Nevertheless, three teachers suggested focusing on language for the following reasons:

- (1) Without a certain level of language accuracy, comprehension is difficult:

I found most of my students, their composition is hard to understand, so I can't just focus on the content. I need to help them to improve so that they can express their opinions. (Teacher B)

- (2) WCF for lower-form students require more language assistance:

I think for lower-form students, the emphasis should be put on grammar because they cannot express themselves well (Teacher E).

- (3) Feedback should be related to the language taught in class:

For me, composition is a writing exercise. It is for a language purpose, and this purpose fits in what the teacher has been teaching...the composition should somehow reflect teachers' instructions...I expect students to write using the kind of structure taught. (Teacher A)

6.5 Beliefs and Rationales for WCF Focusing on Content/Organisation

Two teachers recommended focusing on content/organisation over language use. The rationales are:

- (1) Communication is more important than anything else:

...as long as we can communicate with others, as long as we can understand what the student means, I think it's ok to make [language] mistakes. (Teacher F)

- (2) A good organisation can guarantee a good piece of writing:

For us, the organisation is kind of standard, like whatever your essay is, you must have it...so did the student give clear points? if he did, then we give eight or nine points [=a high mark] for [the writing]. (Teacher J)

The focus of feedback received somewhat mixed opinions. Proponents of marking language use believed that language accuracy is fundamental to the understanding of the text, which is why lower-level students should be given more feedback on grammar and vocabulary. Some only targeted items explicitly discussed in class. Opposing teachers, however, claimed that with good organisation, the writing should not be too difficult to understand, and emphasis should be put on the message delivered.

6.6 Beliefs and Rationales for Direct WCF

Four teachers recommended giving direct WCF over indirect ones. Major rationales are:

- (1) Students are not able to correct their mistakes:

[Students] don't know what to do with their mistakes, so sometimes I will rewrite some sentences for them, and then I mark their compositions and I also give comments. (Teacher C)

- (2) Students may not understand the symbols:

I can't write the symbols. They don't understand what they mean, so I have to write, for example, "learn knowledge", I would say "gain knowledge". I would write the words out. (Teacher G)

One teacher preferred to offer both direct feedback and indirect feedback in the same piece of writing, depending on the complexity of the error:

[Students] can usually take care of the simple grammar...If the sentence structure is impeding or changing the meaning, then I will give much more direct changes, but if it is small stuff; it's close enough, then I usually let [students] figure it out themselves...(Teacher H)

6.7 Beliefs and Rationales for Indirect WCF

The majority of teachers favoured indirect feedback over direct correction (n= 7). Their main rationales are:

- (1) Indirect marking appears less pervasive or intimidating:

I use symbols mostly, because I don't want to make [students' writing] too red. Students wouldn't like it. (Teacher C)

- (2) The teacher should not take the place of the writer:

You cannot really give [students] the exact sentence because that would become your composition. (Teacher B)

- (3) Teachers can familiarise students with a reasonable number of codes:

I will give them less than ten codes. Then I will provide them with an example sentence. I

work that out with my students together, and then to get them familiar with the codes...(Teacher E)

- (4) Capable/higher-level learners benefit more from symbols:

It depends on the student's level. If they are fast-learners, they may learn better with symbols. So I will give them some symbols and ask them to rewrite their essay. (Teacher F)

I think for form 5 form 6 boys, they are capable of spotting the mistake with the symbols. They can do the correction on their own. I am not going to give them everything. It is based on students' ability. (Teacher L)

- (5) Casual writing requires less explicit marking:

I think it depends on the composition. If it's a piece of journal, I will only circle the mistakes. I won't even care to give the symbols. (Teacher K)

Most teachers praised the effectiveness of indirect feedback. Several pointed out the importance of ownership from the perspective of students, which could be reduced if teachers rewrote the mistaken parts for the students. They recommended that codes be taught in class and would consider the level of the students and the purpose of the writing piece. Some teachers had concerns over students' ability to interpret the codes and correcting their mistakes based on them.

6.8 Beliefs and Rationales for Peer Feedback

Most teachers did not favour peer feedback (n=7) for three main reasons:

- (1) Students do not possess the language ability to review others writing:

I dare say that peer review doesn't work, among Chinese students. Peer review doesn't work, because overall their level is too low. Even I teach an elite class, a senior form 5 elite class, they can't point out each other's mistakes. (Teacher E)

- (2) Students are not used to providing feedback for others:

Students are not used to correcting their peers. You have to train them to do it. (Teacher K)

- (3) Students may not trust peers' corrections:

Even if [the student's] peer can correct his mistakes, he may not believe his peer and will not take the peer feedback seriously. (Teacher D)

Others believed peer feedback would work for the following reasons (n= 5):

- (1) Research recommends peer feedback:

I read a lot of papers that say peer feedback is important and it works. (Teacher G)

- (2) Peer feedback is less intimidating than teacher feedback:

Sometimes I think [students] are willing to listen to their peers too, so you can pair them up, and help each other if it's not something personal then. Sometimes they won't really come to you. They are more comfortable with each other. (Teacher J)

6.9 Beliefs and Rationales for Teacher Conferencing

All teachers agreed that teacher conferencing is an effective method. Their rationales are:

- (1) Lower-level students need individual consultations:

For me, because I am working in an evening school, my students' English level is really low. I would prefer to give them the paper and I use Chinese to express my opinions to them individually. (Teacher B)

- (2) Teacher conferencing works in smaller classes:

...I give oral feedback for each student because maybe there are not too many students in my class so I have enough time to give them oral feedback. (Teacher D)

- (3) Research says it works:

I'll give them some in-class time to ask me. I've read articles about this method. It's called teacher conferencing. They may ask me in Chinese...I will allow them in-class time to let them ask me, clarify their ideas. I find that very useful, even when I teach junior two, very weak, very unmotivated students. (Teacher E)

- (4) Only some students receive individual consultations:

If some students do not understand what is wrong with [their writing], I will explain individually sometimes. (Teacher K)

- (5) The teacher only explains what students do not understand:

...I usually tell [students] that they should come with questions too. It shouldn't all be on me, like, it shouldn't be me trying to tell them what to do... because we only have a very short amount of time... (Teacher H)

Opinions on peer feedback tended to be negative. Most teachers had concerns over students' abilities. Although some teachers mentioned what research claimed about the effectiveness of peer feedback, others doubted the research findings and many did not seem to be convinced.

6.10 Other Related Themes

Other relevant themes emerged in the process of discussion. Some teachers talked about reasons and rationales for giving comments (n= 6):

- (1) Students enjoy reading comments:

I won't make a paragraph, but as a student, I would like to see a short comment on my paper from the teacher. (Teacher C)

- (2) The length of comments depends on the level of students:

For higher-level students, I usually give comments, a few sentences I think, like a short paragraph, but for lower-level students, I will give just short comments, because I know that they don't understand, so I will do what actually works. (Teacher B)

- (3) Avoid direct criticism in comments:

I don't do direct criticism...Usually I write in question forms. I try to tell students, anything can be improved...(Teacher H)

A few teachers talked about reasons for offering whole-class feedback (n= 3):

- (1) Common mistakes should be explained to the whole class:

For oral feedback, I usually give oral feedback to the whole class first to focus on some common mistakes (Teacher D).

[Individual consultation] kills me cause I'd be very tired. I think it's important, I try to do it, but if you can, like it's a common problem with the whole class, just talk to the whole class (Teacher J).

6.11 Constraints on Implementing Preferred WCF Practices

Interestingly, all teachers voiced that to a certain extent they were not able to offer WCF the way they preferred (n= 12). Although the majority of teachers favoured focused marking, schools did not allow them to do that:

"Many schools require teachers to correct every single mistake...Before I tried to negotiate that with my panel, but she didn't agree, and then she said, 'if you didn't point it out, then you overlook the mistakes. You are careless. You are not being responsible.'"
(Teacher E)

Teachers' beliefs aside, some said they offered indirect feedback only because of certain external factors (n= 5), including 1) School requirements:

I use symbols because the school ask me to use symbols. (Teacher B)

- (1) For convenience because they believed students would not care about the marking:

I will just circle the mistakes...The point is I don't think they will read it afterwards.

(Teacher I)

(2) Students' English level is too low to be helped

I just underline the sentences and write a question mark on their essay...It is very hard to follow [up] because my students are very weak. Imagine, very very weak. (Teacher F)

Similarly, some teachers stated they focused on marking the language instead of content/organisation (n= 3) because it is a policy of their schools:

The school might not care what the students write...the school always focus only grammar or the language problems. (Teacher G)

Many teachers also mentioned it was unlikely that they followed up on students' corrections (n= 7). Two reasons are that:

(1) Students' motivation to correct their writing is low.

...They need to recorrect, but most of them didn't submit their writing to me. That's why I said their motivation is really really low. And even though they didn't submit their writing, they can still pass the writing task. (Teacher F)

(2) Others said they did not have the time to check students' correction

...I seldom ask them to do corrections because I don't even have time to [remark]...because usually I am just reaching the deadline. Right before they have the next test, I return the first test. (Teacher I)

Some teachers said it was very unlikely for them to offer comments because they have too much to mark (n= 3):

I don't have enough time. In this semester, I need to have three writing classes, and every week I need to mark. It is impossible to write comments. (Teacher C)

I don't do it on every piece of writing. Otherwise, I would be writing like hell. I just pick out the mistakes or the points, make a PowerPoint slide and then I share it in class with everyone. (Teacher L)

As stated earlier, most teachers do not prefer to have peer review of writing (n= 7). Many claimed that students simply did not have the ability to do it.

Even [though] I teach an elite class, a Senior Form 5 elite class, they can't point out each other's mistakes. (Teacher E)

Even though all teachers acknowledged the effectiveness of teacher conferencing, half of the teachers expressed difficulties in conducting it (n= 6) because they did not have the time to

do it

It is because of time. I don't have enough time to talk to each student individually, so I just talked to those who fail the test. (Teacher C)

[Teacher conferencing is] very time-consuming...because mine is a big-size class. (Teacher F)

More interestingly, some teachers expressed a change of both beliefs and practices due to practical constraints (n= 3):

I used to give positive comments for every composition, but I found it was not practical...I have too much to mark...I don't give comments anymore. I think students can still benefit from other [types of] marking. (Teacher D)

When responding to every question, teachers mentioned different forms of difficulties when implementing their intended methods of feedback. School/management requirements, teacher workload, time constraints and students' ability repeatedly emerged in the discussions. They resulted in teachers' inability to provide explicit corrections to mistakes, offer comments, and conduct teacher conferencing, despite knowing the benefits of these practices. Other constraints noted include a tight teaching syllabus, large class size and a sense of 'unworthiness' of teachers' time and effort owing to the indifferent attitudes of students towards WCF. These practical issues did not only change their feedback practices, but also seemed to have affected their beliefs.

7. Discussions of Findings

The current study recruited teachers who were interested in WCF research to examine their beliefs and rationales behind their WCF practices. Results largely echo with previous findings (Evans et al., 2010; Lee, 2008; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). However, emphases are placed on the teachers' rationales and the limitations that they face. As can be seen, these research-informed participants rely largely on their teaching experience and occasionally refer to research findings when they decided on a "better" way to mark EFL learners' writing. Although participants only mentioned research in a few instances, most of their rationales could find their base in existing literature, for instance, regarding the importance to consider students' feelings (Semke, 1984), targeting frequent mistakes (Chan, 2010), targeting mistakes that affect comprehension (Vann et al., 1984), lowering the threshold for students to correct their mistakes (Chandler, 2003), considering students' language level (Lee, 2004), confidence issues in peer feedback (Zhang, 1995), precautions to conduct peer review (Sato, 2013), and the high effectiveness of teacher conferencing (Shams-Abadi & Ahmadi, 2016).

However, we found an equal, if not greater, force from their practical constraints that drive them to administer WCF the way that they do not prefer to. As found in Lee (2008), an overwhelming majority of teachers recommended marking selectively. However, many said they had to mark comprehensively instead due to school policies. For directness of marking, the current study found that teachers favoured indirect marking more and also reported practising it more often in actual feedback. Interestingly, however, both rationales to the benefits of teaching and learning and constraints as to school policies, students' learning attitude and ability were salient driving factors to their decision. Further, half of the participants reported giving comments to students, and the other half of the participants also agreed to the stated benefits; yet, the latter stated that commenting was basically impossible because they had too many other tests or compositions to mark. The same was found in teacher conferencing, of which teachers unanimously acknowledged the effectiveness, but owing to the size of the classes and time, half of the teachers decided not to conduct it. It was evident to the researcher that many of the teachers' rationales were intertwined with constraints, making them inseparable. Time constraints, teachers' workload, perceived attitude of students towards WCF were constraints found in previous studies (e.g., Chapin & Terdal, 1990; Lee, 2008; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019). The current study has identified six major constraints that impact teachers' WCF practices: 1) school policies, 2) teachers' workload, 3) students' ability, 4) (tight) teaching syllabi, 5) class sizes and 6) perceived learner attitude towards WCF. According to teachers, these constraints could largely influence their actions, steer them away from their rationales and even change their beliefs in WCF. Whether or how practical constraints shape teachers beliefs in WCF should prove to be an interesting subject for further investigation. In addition, debates over which methods, types or sources of WCF work more effectively could be put aside if constraints play a vital role in WCF practices. Rather, given all methods have certain research backing, researchers should start examining which WCF practices are more feasible and efficient in actual teaching.

8. Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations

This study adopted focus-group discussions to elicit beliefs, rationales, practices and concerns from 12 Macao secondary school EFL teachers who appeared to be well-informed by research. Findings are somewhat similar to existing literature. In particular, teachers have their own beliefs in WCF; they were able to offer unambiguous rationales for why they offer WCF in certain ways, but their WCF practices could be notably different from their beliefs. More interestingly, based on the discussion, their rationales were often mentioned along with

certain practical limitations that they faced. The six constraints identified in this study appeared to have a determining effect on their decision of WCF. If constraints are the driving force for teachers' WCF practices and can potentially shake their beliefs, then future research is advised to focus on the effects of practical constraints rather than attempting to align beliefs with practices, as the causal link between the two may be indirect and minimal. Alternatively, there is a possible moderating role that constraints are playing on the relationship between beliefs and practices. Hence, a quantitative investigation on WCF will be necessary. Further, practicality and feasibility could be the core factors of consideration in future research of WCF.

Despite the new insights offered in this study, readers are cautioned against taking the stated findings as a general phenomenon, given the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample. Further, it is possible that certain secondary schools in Macao exert relatively strict controls over teachers and teaching, which may not be experienced by teachers from other schools who were not involved in the discussion; even less it may be applicable to those who work in other cities or countries, a reason why further investigations along the line but in other contexts are necessary.

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