Student-inspired Pedagogy: Students' Beliefs and Preferences Regarding Second Language Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

By adopting a student-inspired pedagogy, this preliminary study attempts to answer questions about second language (L2) writing pedagogical practices in higher education by examining student attitudes, beliefs and preferences on L2 academic writing. In particular, the pilot study analyzes student beliefs concerning the most effective timing and type of feedback provided by the instructor. The study reports on the preliminary results from a questionnaire given to 36 first-year students at a university in North Macedonia. The results of the pilot study are discussed in the light of the theoretical and pedagogical implications that can be applied in L2 writing, teacher development and curriculum design settings.

KEYWORDS: *second language writing, second language pedagogy, student beliefs, corrective feedback*

INTRODUCTION

Written corrective feedback (WCF) refers to responses and comments on students' errors in producing written language targeting both language and content errors (Li and Vuono, 2019). The effectiveness of corrective feedback has been called into question over the years, thus producing a large body of research investigating the value of CF in the process of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language (L2) pedagogy (for example, Ferris, 2004; Li, 2019). While WCF has been considered essential for the development of second language (L2) writing skills by some (such as, Hyland & Hyland, 2006; and Ferris, 1999, 2004), it has been viewed as ineffective and harmful by others (see, Truscott, 1996, 1999). Recent accounts on WCF, including several meta-analyses and research syntheses (for example, Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Kang & Han, 2015; Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Li, 2010; and Li & Vuono, 2019) generally point to a facilitative effect of WCF for grammatical accuracy, but also demonstrate that there are various factors such as students' proficiency, the context of learning and the genre of the writing task, that can act as mitigating factors. For instance, Bitchener and Ferris (2012) point out there might be some differences in the focus of writing in L2 classes as opposed to composition classes, where the emphasis is more on discourse-related issues rather than language-related ones. Similarly, the authors note that the focus may be different depending on the language proficiency of the students.

Research on L2 WCF has predominantly focused on the effectiveness of teacher WCF on the accuracy of L2 writing or on the reported and observed teacher practices regarding the when, how and why of corrective feedback (Polio et al., 1998; Hyland, F., 2003; Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris, 2006; and Van Beuningen et al., 2008). Significantly fewer studies have investigated students' attitudes, beliefs and preferences for L2 WCF both for language-related errors and content and coherence issues (Radecki and Swales, 1988; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996). Several researchers have noted that providing feedback is a form of a social act and as such inextricably connects teacher feedback and students' responses to it, urging us to go beyond the individual act of providing feedback and account for factors which may impact feedback choices as well as students' responses to them (Schulz, 1996; Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Teacher WCF needs to be processed and acted upon by the L2 students, and hence the effectiveness of the WCF could also hinge on students' preconceived notions, developed preferences or even past habits about which errors should be corrected, how and when. As Hyland & Hyland (2019) heed, "we shouldn't ignore perspectives that might help us understand the ways individuals may prefer to interact, teach and learn". Therefore, exploring students' attitudes, beliefs and preferences regarding WCF during writing classes can enable us to further our understanding of the internal processes of receiving WCF by students and adopt some of those preferences into the practice of teaching writing in foreign or second language composition classes.

Existing research on students' beliefs regarding the effectiveness of WCF has demonstrated several important findings. Students not only feel positive about and value teacher WCF (e.g. Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998; Chen et al., 2016), but they also expect to receive feedback on their writing (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996). Concerning the type of feedback, Ellis (2009) proposed a three-way distinction between direct, metalinguistic, or an indirect type of feedback, as well as it being focused and unfocused. Direct feedback involves providing the correct form for the learner, for example replacing "goed" with "went". Metalinguistic feedback provides a clue for the learner to identify the error, with either an error code such as "T" for tense, or a comment such as "use past perfect tense", while indirect feedback signals the location of

the error without providing any clues or corrections. Focused, or selective, feedback refers to teachers correcting selectively some errors as opposed to unfocused, or comprehensive, feedback which provides corrections for all identified errors. Studies examining students' preferences for type of feedback have shown that students prefer direct and focused feedback (Chen et al., 2016; Lee, 2005; Leki, 1991; and Radecki & Swales, 1988). For instance, Lee (2005), Leki (1991) and Radecki and Swales (1988) demonstrated that students not only preferred focused feedback, but also wanted their teachers to provide direct feedback and correct their errors. Additionally, Leki (1991) found out that for the participants in this study good writing was equated with error-free writing explaining why students preferred the teacher to correct all of their errors. These studies also looked at students' preferences for receiving WCF on language as opposed to content errors. While Leki (1991) and Radecki and Swales (1988) found out that students prefer comprehensive explicit corrections of language errors at the expense of content, two studies by Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994, 1996) showed that students' preference for language or content varied based on whether they were English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) students. EFL students preferred more feedback on language form, whereas ESL students who used the language beyond the foreign language classrooms preferred feedback on content.

While studies have investigated students' beliefs and preferences about the value and effectiveness of WCF, the preferred type of WCF, the doze and source of WCF, virtually no studies, to our knowledge, have explored students' beliefs and preferences regarding the exact timing of providing WCF and its perceived effectiveness for improving L2 writing. Several studies have noted, however, the importance of providing comments on intermediate drafts rather than on final drafts as this timing may be more facilitative for students' improvement (Leki, 1991; Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2005). A study by Ferris (1995) looked into L2 students' reactions to their teachers' feedback in a multiple-draft approach reaching several important conclusions. First, the study showed that students valued and took their teachers' feedback very seriously as evidenced by the 93per cent of students who thought that teacher WCF enabled them to improve their writing. Second, students reported paying more attention to their corrected papers on earlier drafts than on their final drafts, with a special focus primarily on grammar, content and organization, in this order. Ferris' (1995) results lend support to the notion that teacher feedback on earlier drafts may be more effective than providing feedback to final drafts.

Understanding students' beliefs and preferences about a range of issues related to L2 writing classroom seems to be a priority if theoreticians and practitioners want to increase students' involvement in learning and bridge the gap between teachers' and students' expectations, thereby allowing for a more student-inspired performance, more commonly known as learner-centered pedagogy (Mascolo, 2009). Learner-centered pedagogy bases classroom practices around the needs, beliefs and preferences of learners and involves learners in decision-making processes that affect their learning (Benson 2012). This will be the main topic of inquiry in this paper. In North Macedonia understanding of L2 writing, and in particular, error correction in writing, is virtually an unexplored area and any kind of information about both teacher practice regarding WCF and student responses to WCF are nonexistent. No research in North Macedonia has yet examined the students' beliefs and preferences concerning L2 writing and WCF. The main objective of the present pilot study is therefore to address questions about L2 writing in composition classes in higher education in North Macedonia, in particular, to examine student attitudes, beliefs and preferences regarding the type and timing of WCF for L2 writing. This study not only examines a burning issue locally, but also continues the line of research globally by introducing a variable that has not been explored

so far, in other words, the optimal timing of providing WCF. As a secondary focus, the study also aims at exploring how an understanding of students' beliefs and preferences regarding a particular issue, in this case WCF, can enable the teacher to implement a student-inspired pedagogy.

The following four research questions motivated the present study:

1   What are students' general attitudes towards writing in a second language?
2   What are students' familiarity and perceived usefulness of the pre-writing stages?
3   What are students' beliefs and preferences regarding the types of WCF?
4   What are students' beliefs and preferences regarding the timing of WCF?

THE STUDY

Participants

The participants in this pilot study were 36 students (13 male, average age 19.3 and 23 female, average age 19.6) taking EFL writing composition classes at a private university in North Macedonia. Twenty three were majoring in Business, 8 in Business communication and translation in English, and 5 in Computer science and technology. All enrolled students (n=140) in the Academic writing course were invited to participate in the study, which was explained to them as a research study exploring students' beliefs about writing in English, but only 36 agreed to participate.

Pedagogical context

All of the participants in this study were enrolled in three different sections of the course Academic writing at a private university in North Macedonia. Composition is a required course for all majors at the university and students take it in their freshman year. The instructor used a multiple-draft approach and covered topics ranging from sentence structure, paragraph structure and essay structure. Three types of essaya were covered during the course: afive-paragraph essay, a compare and contrast piece and an argumentative essay. Students were required to complete the pre-writing stages of brainstorming and outlining prior to writing the first, second and final draft of the paragraphs and essays. In other words, for each writing assignment students were taught and practiced the pre-writing stages of brainstorming, outlining and revising. The instructor provided in-class and/or out-of class oral and written feedback at all of the stages of writing. The grading rubric, given to the students prior to the assignments, made it clear that language structure, content and organization are all important for students to score highly.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of three sections. Section 1 aimed at gathering background information about the participants. Section 2 consisted of 26 five-point Likert scale items which elicited information about a range of issues such as: student attitudes towards L2 writing, familiarity with the pre-writing stages, perceived usefulness of the pre-writing stages, the type of WCF received during the class, as well as the perceived usefulness and preference for the timing of receiving WCF. Section 3 contained open-ended questions which aimed at giving participants more opportunities to express their attitudes, beliefs and preferences concerning the above-mentioned issues. The survey was sent via e-mail to all students attending the course (140) at the end of the semester. At the beginning of the survey, it was explained to the students that participating in this

pilot study was voluntary and no penalties were to follow should students decide not to participate. All gathered data were kept anonymous and informed consent forms were collected from the 36 participants who completed the survey. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to explore students' attitudes, beliefs and preferences regarding the topics covered and the strategies used to improve their writing in the Composition class they attended.

Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to analyze the data. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, only descriptive statistics will be reported (mean, standard deviation, mode, and frequency counts). Since relying on the means for this type of Likert scale data can be misleading at times, modes, as an alternative measure of central tendency indicating the most commonly occurring value, were also computed. The findings will be presented according to subtopics: (1) students' general beliefs towards L2 writing (items 1-6), (2) students' familiarity and perceived usefulness of the pre-writing stages (items 7-10), (3) students' beliefs about WCF (11-14) and (4) students' beliefs about the most optimal timing for WCF. The first three subtopics will be analyzed as a scale, whereas students' beliefs about the most optimal timing for WCF will be analyzed by considering participants' answers to the single-items 22-26 as well as participants' answers to the open-ended questions.

Examining the quality of an instrument is a required and necessary step when developing a new instrument. Quality is usually achieved through validity, "the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure, rather than something else" (Taber, 2018: 1) and reliability, "the extent to which an instrument can be expected to give the same measured outcome when measurements are repeated" (Taber, 2018:1). This pilot study employs Cronbach's alpha as a measure of the instrument's reliability and hence as an indicator of its quality. As can be seen from Table 1, Cronbach's alpha showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha > .8$) for all of the subscales except for the last one (George and Mallery, 2003): the general beliefs scale consisted of 6 items ($\alpha = 0.79$), the students' familiarity with the pre-writing stages subscale consisted of 4 items ($\alpha = 0.83$), and students' perceived usefulness of pre-writing stages consisted of 4 items ($\alpha = .84$), and the WCF subscale consisted of 7 items ($\alpha = 0.65$).

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha for subscales in the Questionnaire

Questionnaire items		Cronbach's alpha
General beliefs about L2 writing:	1-6	0.79
Familiarity with pre-writing stages:	7-10	0.83
Usefulness of pre-writing stages:	11-14	0.84
Beliefs about WCF:	15-21	0.65

RESULTS

Students' General Beliefs about L2 writing

Response frequencies with counts and percentages for the items in the questionnaire addressing students' general beliefs towards L2 writing appear in Table 2, whereas means, standard deviations and modes are presented in Table 3. These items specifically

address the first research question and provide evidence that the EFL students in this pilot study have an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards writing in English as shown by the percentage of participants agreeing with the statements 1-6. Table 3 also demonstrates that the most commonly chosen option for all of the items was "strongly agree" as indicated in the mode column. In addition, 91.7 per cent of the participants seem to have been aware of the tedious nature of writing as they strongly agreed that becoming better at writing required practicing regularly.

Table 2

Frequency and percentage reported for Questionnaire Items 1-6
General attitude towards L2 writing

Statement	Agree*	Neutral	Disagree**
1. Learning to write in English is a very important skill for my academic study at the University.	32 (88.9)	3 (8.3)	1 (2.8)
2. Learning to write in English is a very important skill for my future profession.	29 (80.5)	5 (13.9)	2 (5.6)
3. Learning to write in English is a very important life skill	31 (86.1)	5 (13.9)	/
4. I enjoy writing in English.	30 (83.4)	6 (16.7)	/
5. I feel that becoming better at writing requires practicing writing regularly.	33 (91.7)	3 (8.3)	/
6. I feel that practicing writing involves improving my critical thinking skills.	29 (80.5)	7 (19.4)	/

*The categories of *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* are combined into *Agree*
**The categories of *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* are combined into *Disagree*

Table 3

Means, standard deviations and mode for Questionnaire Items 1-6
General attitude towards L2 writing

Statement number	Means	SD	Mode
1. Learning to write in English is a very important skill for my academic study at the University.	4.6	0.76	5
2. Learning to write in English is a very important skill for my future profession.	4.3	0.92	5
3. Learning to write in English is a very important life skill.	4.5	0.73	5
4. I enjoy writing in English.	4.3	0.76	5
5. I feel that becoming better at writing requires practicing writing regularly.	4.5	0.65	5
6. I feel that practicing writing involves improving my critical thinking skills.	4.3	0.77	5

Students' familiarity and beliefs about pre-writing stages

The second research question aimed at exploring students' familiarity (Items 7-10) and perceived usefulness (11-14) of the pre-writing stages in writing: brainstorming and outlining as well as revising. Response frequencies with counts and percentages for items 7-14 in the questionnaire appear in Table 4, whereas means, standard deviations and modes are presented in Table 5. What stands out from both tables for the items indicating students' familiarity is the uncertainty of how to interpret the neutral category. Table 4 shows almost an equal proportion of students agreeing on one hand, and being neutral and disagreeing, on the other hand. This trend is also shown in the means for these items in Table 5 which center around 3. In this particular case, it may be wise to interpret the neutral category as "I am not sure", indicating some kind of unfamiliarity with these stages. It seems that half of the participants were somewhat familiar with the stages of pre-writing stages, and half were not familiar.

Regarding students' perceptions of how useful each of these stages were, results from items 11-14 overwhelmingly demonstrate that students perceived these stages as useful and beneficial for their development as L2 writers, with means centering around 4 and modes of 5 (strongly agree).

Table 4

Frequency and percentage reported for Questionnaire Items 7-14
Students' familiarity and beliefs about the pre-writing stages

Statement	Agree*	Neutral	Disagree**
7. I was familiar with the prewriting stages in writing before taking this course.	20 (55.6)	7 (19.4)	9 (25)
8. I was familiar with the prewriting stage of brainstorming in writing before taking this course.	18 (50)	9 (25)	9 (25)
9. I was familiar with the prewriting stage of outlining in writing before taking this course.	15 (41.6)	9 (25)	12 (33.3)
10. I was familiar with the stage of revising in writing before taking this course.	17 (47.3)	12 (33.3)	7 (19.4)
11. I believe that brainstorming is a useful stage in the academic writing process.	32 (88.9)	4 (11.1)	/
12. I believe that outlining is a useful stage in the academic writing process.	30 (83.3)	6 (16.7)	/
13. The brainstorming stage helped me organize my ideas better.	28 (77.8)	7 (19.4)	1 (2.8)
14. The outlining stage helped me organize my ideas better.	32 (88.9)	4 (11.1)	/

*The categories of *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* are combined into *Agree*

**The categories of *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* are combined into *Disagree*

Table 5

Means, SD and modes reported for Questionnaire Items 7-14
Students' familiarity and beliefs about the pre-writing stages

Statement	Mean	SD	Mode
7. I was familiar with the prewriting stages in writing before taking this course.	3.3	1.12	4
8. I was familiar with the prewriting stage of brainstorming in writing before taking this course.	3.4	1.25	5
9. I was familiar with the prewriting stage of outlining in writing before taking this course.	3.05	1.16	4
10. I was familiar with the stage of revising in writing before taking this course.	3.4	0.99	3
11. I believe that brainstorming is a useful stage in the academic writing process.	4.5	0.69	5
12. I believe that outlining is a useful stage in the academic writing process.	4.2	0.74	5
13. The brainstorming stage helped me organize my ideas better.	4.2	0.87	5
14. The outlining stage helped me organize my ideas better.	4.3	0.65	4

Students' Beliefs about WCF

Data addressing the third research question comes from students' answers to items 15-21. Response frequencies with counts and percentages for these items appear in Table 6, whereas means, standard deviations and modes are presented in Table 7. The most salient finding from Table 6 is that above 90per cent of the students believe that teachers should provide feedback on their writing, a finding which is corroborated with students' answers on item 17, in other words, that it is the teachers' job to locate errors and provide corrections for students. 75per cent of the students also disagreed that

teachers should only locate the error without correcting it, suggesting that not only do students prefer and expect teachers to provide feedback on their writing, but they also expect the teacher to provide the corrections for them (direct feedback). This finding is also evident in Table 7, where the most common option chosen for item 19 is 2, disagree. In addition, when it comes to students correcting errors for themselves, more than half of the students believed that coding errors with the help of a marking code is useful. Finally, students in this sample seem to believe that teachers should give varied feedback, neither concentrating on the mechanics of writing, nor on errors relating to the logical flow of the ideas, as indicated in the tables below. Table 7 clearly shows that the means and modes for items 20 and 21 are below the average, suggesting disagreement.

Table 6

Frequency and percentage reported for Questionnaire Items 15-21 regarding Written Corrective Feedback

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
15. There is no need for teachers to provide feedback on students' errors in writing. RC***	33 (91.7)	2 (5.6)	3 (8.4)
16. Teachers should provide feedback on student errors selectively.	16 (44.5)	8 (22.2)	10 (27.8)
17. It is the teacher's job to locate errors and provide corrections for students.	26 (72.2)	10 (27.8)	/
18. Coding errors with the help of a marking code is a useful means of helping students correct errors for themselves (for example, has went - vf – verb form)	25 (69.4)	11 (30.6)	/
19. Teachers should only locate the error without correcting it.	3 (8.4)	6 (16.7)	27 (75)
20. Teachers should only give feedback on errors relating to the structure of the writing.	6 (16.7)	9 (25)	21 (58.4)
21. Teachers should only give feedback on errors relating to the logical flow of the ideas in the writing.	7 (19.4)	14 (38.9)	15 (41.7)

*The categories of *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* are combined into *Agree*
**The categories of *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* are combined into *Disagree*
***RC – Reverse Coded Item

Table 7

Means, SD and modes reported for Questionnaire Items 15-22 regarding Written Corrective Feedback

Statement	Means	SD	Mode
15. There is no need for teachers to provide feedback on students' errors in writing. RC***	4.5	0.73	5
16. Teachers should provide feedback on student errors selectively.	3.1	1.16	4
17. It is the teacher's job to locate errors and provide corrections for students.	4.05	0.79	4
18. Coding errors with the help of a marking code is a useful means of helping students correct errors for themselves (for example, has went - vf – verb form)	3.7	0.59	4
19. Teachers should only locate the error without correcting it.	2	1.01	2
20. Teachers should only give feedback on errors relating to the structure of the writing.	2.5	0.84	2
21. Teachers should only give feedback on errors relating to the logical flow of the ideas in the writing.	2.7	0.85	3

Students' Beliefs about the timing of WCF

Data for the last research question, students' beliefs and preferences regarding the timing of WCF, comes from items 22-26, as well as one open-ended question. Response frequencies with counts and percentages for the items 22-26 in the questionnaire addressing students' beliefs about the most optimal timing for WCF appear in Table 8, whereas means, standard deviations and modes are presented in Table 9. Table 10 also shows participants' answers in a different format. Note that in this table the percentages do not add up to a 100 as participants could check multiple items. Results for item 22 suggest that in general, 91.6per cent of the students in this sample greatly appreciated the feedback they received from the teacher, while 8.3per cent of them were neutral. Regarding the phase at which teachers' WCF was deemed to be most beneficial, results are slightly confusing. It seems that the majority of the students (above 60per cent and mode of 4) thought that WCF at any of the pre-writing and writing stages (brainstorming and outlining) and after their first and final drat were beneficial for their improvement in L2 writing. Table 10 provides slightly clearer results indicating that the most common options students chose were that teachers' comments were most beneficial during the outlining stage and after writing the first draft. A brief analysis of the open-ended question addressing this issue will be presented below.

Table 8

Frequency and percentage reported for Questionnaire Items 15-22 regarding timing of WCF

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
22. The teacher's comments were useful for me to improve my writing	33 (91.6)	3 (8.3)	/
23. The teacher's comments were most beneficial during the brainstorming stage.	23 (63.8)	11 (3.6)	2 (5.6)
24. The teacher's comments were most beneficial during the outlining stage.	24 (66.7)	11 (3.6)	1 (2.8)
25. The teacher's comments were most beneficial after writing the first draft.	27 (75)	7 (19.4)	2 (5.6)
26. The teacher's comments were most beneficial after writing the final draft	23 (63.9)	10 (27.8)	3 (8.3)

Table 9

Frequency and percentage reported for Questionnaire Items 15-22 regarding timing of WCF

Statement	Means	SD	Mode
22. The teacher's comments were useful for me to improve my writing	4.6	0.64	5
23. The teacher's comments were most beneficial during the brainstorming stage.	3.7	0.83	4
24. The teacher's comments were most beneficial during the outlining stage.	3.7	0.72	4
25. The teacher's comments were most beneficial after writing the first draft.	4	0.86	4
26. The teacher's comments were most beneficial after writing the final draft	3.8	0.96	4

Table 10

When was the teacher's feedback most beneficial? Check all that apply.

Option	Count (percentages)
During brainstorming	17 (47.2per cent)
During the outlining stage	22 (61.1per cent)
After the first draft	21 (58.3per cent)
After the second draft	10 (27.8per cent)
After the final draft	13 (36.1per cent)

At the end of the survey, participants were allowed to express any views regarding the most beneficial timing for providing WCF in an open-ended format. To protect participants' personal information, their names are coded with numbers. Some representative answers are given in Appendix A. From the students' answers, a couple of findings emerge. First, results from the open-ended question corroborate the findings from the closed-ended Likert scale items in that it seems that most of the students chose the outlining stage (ID 06, 09, 11, 17, 17) and after the first draft stage (ID 04, 05, 10, 15, 18, 19) as the most optimal times for receiving WCF. Second, 6 of the participants hinted that ideally WCF would be provided at two times during the writing stage: one during the pre-writing stages, and one during the writing stages of revision (ID 01, 02, 03, 12, 13, 14).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study aimed at exploring students' attitudes, beliefs and preferences on various issues regarding L2 writing such as general attitude towards L2 writing, familiarity and perceived usefulness of the pre-writing stages of brainstorming and outlining, as well as beliefs about the types and sources of WCF and the most optimal timing for receiving WCF.

From the findings presented in the results section, it transpires that the majority of the EFL students in this study generally held affirmative views regarding L2 writing and deemed this skill as a valuable asset in pursuing their academic studies and professional life.

Regarding the pre-writing stages, while the results indicated that half of the EFL students were not familiar with the pre-writing stages of writing prior to taking the course, most of the students indicated that the pre-writing stages of brainstorming and outlining were very useful steps in the process of L2 writing and that both stages enabled students to organize and structure their ideas better. Future versions of the instrument should perhaps frame these questions differently as the answers to the neutral category are ambiguous and hard to interpret.

Findings from the items addressing students' beliefs about WCF generally reflect results from previous studies. EFL students in this study (91.6per cent) felt overwhelmingly positive about the feedback they received and thought that it was beneficial for improving their writing. This is in line with studies by Chen et al., (2016), Ferris (1995) and Hyland (1998). 91.7per cent of the students in this study also indicated that teachers should provide feedback on their errors in writing, a finding reminiscent of results from studies such as Ferris (1995) and Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994, 1996). In terms of type of feedback, students in this study showed similar if not equal preferences as students in other studies (Radecki & Swales, 1988; Leki, 1991; Lee, 2005; Chen et al., 2016). 72.2per cent of the students believed that it is the teacher's job not only to locate their errors, but also to provide the corrections for them, suggesting that students in this study also prefer to receive direct feedback on their writing. This finding is reinforced by the result that 75per cent of students also disagreed that teachers should provide indirect feedback.

An additional important finding concerns the focus of WCF. Results from this study reveal that students are not against receiving varied feedback, but rather appreciate and expect the WCF to cover mechanics, structure and organization. In their open-ended answers, some students also mentioned that their teacher's comments helped them improve their writing, avoid future mistakes and organize and present their ideas in a clearer way. Similar to previous studies (such as, Radecki & Swales, 1988; Leki, 1991; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994) students did not want the WCF to focus solely on grammar

issues, but also appreciated a focus on content and organization. However, this finding also departs from results obtained in Leki (1991) and Radecki and Swales (1988) in the sense that the participants in their studies found the teacher's feedback most useful when it focused on grammatical errors. It would be worth investigating the factors influencing students' preferences for grammar versus content errors.

Finally, a previous study by Ferris (1995) as well as other authors such as Lee (2005) and Leki (1991) have suggested that the teacher's feedback on earlier drafts may be more effective than providing feedback on the final draft. The results from our study provide only indirect evidence for this finding as only students' beliefs and preferences were investigated and not actual gains in L2 writing accuracy due to WCF. Namely, while participants in this study believed that receiving feedback during every stage was beneficial for them, they also indicated that providing WCF during the outlining stage and before the final draft was particularly useful for them. It seems that for this cohort, the ideal timing for providing WCF is twice: once during the pre-writing stages and once on their earlier drafts.

Pedagogical implications

The findings of this pilot study can inform L2 writing instructors, curriculum designers or teacher trainers about several important points. First, it seems that it is worth introducing the students to the pre-writing stages of brainstorming and outlining by incorporating them into the necessary and required steps for L2 writing. Second, both instructors and students should acknowledge that holding a particular belief regarding the type of error corrections is not always indicative of its effectiveness (Diab, 2005). Ferris et al. (1997) for instance, propose and recommend that instructors inform students about the effectiveness of different types of feedback and explain the reasons why a particular type of feedback may be provided. Otherwise, students may not see the value of the feedback and decide not to act upon it. Third, similarly to other studies, instructors' feedback should not solely focus on grammar at the expense of content, but rather should provide a balanced WCF covering errors in mechanics, organization and content.

A particularly insightful pedagogical implication comes from the findings about students' preferences for the timing of WCF. According to the EFL cohort in this study, instructors should aim at providing WCF at least twice during the writing process: after the outlining stage and after the first or second draft.

Finally, this study provides support for the notion of student-inspired pedagogy. Since the findings of this study will be used to improve on the contents and practices of future Academic writing classes, it is advisable for all teachers who want to bridge the gap between their own preferences and expectations and those of the students, to conduct small-scale formal or informal classroom research exploring students' beliefs about writing in an L2, pre-writing stages, feedback and error correction. As emphasized by Schulz (1996), Diab (2005) and Lee (2008), the responsibility is on the teachers to be aware of students' beliefs and preferences and either incorporate them in their teaching or modify them by providing informed explanations. Students may also benefit from being exposed to an array of beliefs and practices so that they can choose an alternative should they need it. Exploring students' beliefs provides theoreticians and practitioners with an opportunity to further our understanding of the internal processes that students go through in the process of writing and revising in an L2, and also enables us to increase students' involvement in the learning process, viewing them not as passive recipients of the knowledge transmitted, but rather as active participants in the creation of knowledge.

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Appendix A

Table 11

Students' answers to: Please specify when the teacher's comments on your writing were most useful to you and why.

ID 01   "Most useful when finishing the outline- it is a mix of the brainstorming and also a skeleton for, I would even say, the first draft of my essay. A second needed feedback would be after revision of the first draft."

ID 02   "Personally, teacher's comments were most useful to me during the outline stage because that's the moment where i build the structure and idea of the essay and after the final draft so i can see if the essay is written good or not."

ID 03   "The teacher helped me a lot when it came to organizing my ideas and expressing them appropriately. This was during the outlining of the essay, but also when writing the first draft. I applied the teacher's suggestions on what to improve, not to write too long essays, and to give evidence and examples that would support my arguments."

ID 04   "After the first draft because then i could see where the flaws were in my essay and it was easy to correct them."

ID 05   "After the first draft because it is important to know if you on the right track."

ID 06   "For me personally, the most beneficial time for providing a feedback is at the beggining, when the brainstorming and outlining is done. Because when you know that you are doing it right and have a good feedback it is much easier to start writing the essay."

ID 07   "Comments on the final piece and the previous draft, because when you finish your final piece, you think that it is perfect and there are no errors whatsoever, but when you see how much you can improve it is really good, in simple words dives deeper in the errors and helps you perfect the piece."

ID 08   "The comments were most beneficial in class because i can fix and redo the mistakes there and then, if i were to get the feedback at the end of the class or by email i would most probably forget to do it at home :)"

ID 09   "During the outlining stage, because it helped to improve the further structure on the whole essay."

ID 10   "After the first draft, since that is the stage where the writing is still able to change and improve."

ID 11   "During the outlining stage."

ID 12   "During brainstorming and outlining because of my lack of ideas sometimes and especially after final draft to get a point about whole essay and to fix the errors that were made."

ID 13   "They were most useful after the first draft and after the brainstorming stage, our teacher indicated our mistakes right away and told us how to correct them in the final draft."

ID 14   "During the outlining stage and after first or second drafts."

ID 15   "After writing the first and the second draft. Thanks to the comments of my teacher i was able to notice my mistakes and by correcting them the final look of the essay looked much better."

ID 16   "The most useful comments were about the prewriting and creating the outline.

ID 17   "During the outlining stage, because it helped to improve the further structure on the whole essay."

ID 18   "Before finishing the essay"

ID 19   "After the first draft, since that is the stage where the writing is still able to change and improve."

ID 20   "It was very beneficial to read and revise other students' essays, and then grade them on specific criteria. Being a reader helped me realize what I needed to correct in my own essays and what criteria to pay more attention to. It was also beneficial to see what other students thought about my writing and their suggestions on how to improve it."