

## The Feedback Dilemma: Aligning L2 Writing Instruction with Student Preferences

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### ABSTRACT

In writing classes, teachers implement Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) as a form of Corrective Feedback (CF). It is an instructional strategy teachers used in the classroom to improve L2 students' writing skills. Nevertheless, the incongruity between the preferences of students and the instructional strategies employed by teachers for WCF has resulted in challenges for teachers and perplexity for the students. The study aims to achieve the following objectives: 1) to examine the forms of CF used by L2 teachers when assessing students' writing, 2) to explore the types of CF that students prefer when receiving feedback on their writing, and 3) to determine whether the teachers' WCF practices align with the students' preferences. The researchers employed the Feedback Scale to gather data for the study. Additionally, purposive opportunistic sampling was utilised in selecting the study's participants. The findings show that the L2 teachers provide more indirect WCF and focused WCF, whereas the L2 students prefer direct WCF and unfocused WCF. This demonstrates the concept of a disparity between the pedagogical approaches that teachers employ and the preferences that students have expressed regarding WCF. The study has implications on the writing instruction of English Language writing class.

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### KEYWORDS:

Written Corrective Feedback

L2 teacher practices

L2 students' preferences

Writing instruction

### CITATION:

Sabariah Abd Rahim, Alice, A., Cui, Q., & Yang, X. (2024). The Feedback Dilemma: Aligning L2 Writing Instruction with Student Preferences. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 9(12), e003138.

<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v9i12.3138>

**Contribution/Originality:** This study demonstrates L2 teachers' Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) practices differ from students' preferences, providing useful insights into aligning methods of instruction with learner requirements. The study improves English writing teaching and teacher-student collaboration by emphasising direct and unfocused feedback for students.

## 1. Introduction

Corrective Feedback (CF) is crucial in language teaching since it plays a vital part in enhancing the writing skills of L2 students. It is recommended that L2 teachers provide CF in the classroom to enhance L2 students' proficiency in writing skills (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). According to Ferris (2006), CF assists students in enhancing their writing skills. Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is a commonly employed feedback method utilized by L2 teachers in language classrooms (Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1995). WCF is a widely used teaching strategy that has a positive impact on students' writing skills (Razali & Jupri, 2014; Ferris, 2010) and their capacity to learn a L2 (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). It helps L2 students become conscious of the errors they make in their writing. While learners demonstrate a greater preference for WCF on grammatical errors compared to lexical or mechanical errors, regardless of their proficiency level (Zhang, 2018), offering feedback on L2 students' writing presents challenges due to the comprehensive nature of writing as a language skill. Also, writing proficiency is a multifaceted skill that necessitates L2 students to focus on several elements, including organization, content, style, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Thus, L2 teachers strive to assess several writing areas to aid L2 students in enhancing their writing proficiency. Also, teachers hold specific attitudes on language teaching and learning, influencing their instructional methods (Woods, 1996; Gebel & Schrier, 2002). In conclusion, WCF is crucial for improving L2 students' writing, requiring alignment between teacher strategies and student preferences.

L2 teachers encounter frustration when efforts to improve L2 students' comprehension of their writing errors result in a deterioration of the overall quality of the students' written work. The writing of L2 students continues to be riddled with errors, which leads to disillusionment among their peers. What might be the cause of this? The irritation of L2 teachers and the disappointment of L2 students can be attributed to the discrepancy between the feedback provided by L2 teachers and the comments preferred by L2 students on their written works (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Lee, 2007). The disparity between the instructional methods employed by L2 teachers and the corrective feedback preferences of L2 students can lead to demoralisation among the latter. This is due to the students' disheartenment upon receiving their written work adorned with copious red markings and annotations from their teachers. Consequently, the writing proficiency of these L2 students may not experience a substantial enhancement.

Research has been carried out to determine the preferred style of feedback for L2 students. However, the results do not indicate a unanimous agreement on the sort of feedback that is beneficial for both L2 students and L2 teachers. For instance, Aridah et al. (2017) discovered that the teachers administered direct corrective feedback in a nearly identical manner as indirect corrective feedback. Nevertheless, the teachers exhibited a tendency to provide a greater amount of indirect feedback rather than direct corrective feedback. The participants in the study showed a lack of preference for this particular form of cognitive function. They preferred receiving direct CF rather than indirect CF because it was the most efficient and effortless method for correcting their writing drafts. This study identifies a discrepancy between the teaching methods employed by the teachers and the learning preferences of the students. Chen (2012) conducted a study that identified a discrepancy between the teaching methods used by teachers and the preferences of students. The students in the study expressed a preference for receiving more WCF and direct CF from their teachers. In contrast, the majority of teachers in the study did not give

priority to WCF and instead emphasised giving indirect error correction using coding. This study revealed yet another striking abnormality.

A separate investigation carried out by [Norouziyan and Farahani \(2012\)](#) at the University of Tehran, Iran examined the practices reported by 15 L2 teachers and the preferences of 45 students. The study identified inconsistencies between teachers' practices and students' preferences regarding the scope (comprehensive vs. selective) and nature (direct vs. indirect) of WCF. Nearly all teachers reported adhering to the all-encompassing methodology of WCF, aligning it with students' preferences and their own teaching techniques. Regarding the clarity of WCF, most teachers indicated that they provided feedback indirectly using error codes. However, this approach does not correspond to their actual teaching methods or the preferences of their students, who prefer to get direct feedback. [Amrhein and Nassaji \(2010\)](#) conducted a comparison between teachers' beliefs and students' preferences about WCF. The study involved distributing questionnaires to a total of 33 ESL students and 31 ESL teachers from two separate private English language schools in Canada. The results indicated that both students and teachers held similar beliefs regarding the effectiveness of WCF, with the majority agreeing that it is most beneficial for teachers to provide feedback on as many errors as they can. Nevertheless, there was a divergence of opinion between teachers and students over the emphasis of WCF. Although students displayed a preference for different areas of writing, many teachers chose to focus on language form. The subject of which style of feedback is effective and preferable for L2 students and L2 teachers remains unresolved. The disparities between the preferences of L2 students regarding WCF and the actual practices of L2 teachers can result in subpar writing performance. In light of this discrepancy, the subsequent questions are presented:

- i. How do L2 teachers provide WCF on L2 students' writing?
- ii. Which forms of WCF are most preferred by L2 students in their writing?
- iii. How well do L2 teachers' WCF practices match the preferences of L2 students?

### 1.1. Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are:

- i. to examine the forms of WCF used by L2 teachers when assessing students' writing
- ii. to explore the types of WCF that students prefer when receiving feedback on their writing
- iii. to assess if teacher's WCF practices correspond to the preferences of their students

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Written Corrective Feedback

Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is considered a crucial element of L2 teaching methods. It is the result of linguistic errors that are committed by L2 learners in their writing ([Bitchener & Ferris, 2012](#)). [Truscott \(1996\)](#) adamantly opposed the application of WCF in classroom. As a strong advocate for a more natural, input-based approach to language instruction, he believes that CF will establish a pseudo-learning environment for L2 learners that will impact the learners' L2 growth. Nevertheless, studies have demonstrated that WCF positively influences the accuracy of writing in L2 learners ([Jerry et al., 2013](#); [Kassim & Ng, 2014](#)), improves writing performance ([Ferris, 2010](#); [Razali &](#)

Jupri, 2014), and enhances L2 learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). As a result, it is recommended that L2 teachers provide WCF to assist L2 learners in improving their writing skills (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Gower et al., 1995; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The evidence suggests that WCF is a crucial component of L2 teaching methods. It effectively enhances the accuracy, performance, and overall language development of L2 learners, even though there is some opposition.

Ellis (2009) introduced a thorough classification system for WCF that includes six clearly defined categories. The categories encompass direct feedback, metalinguistic feedback, focused feedback, unfocused feedback, digital feedback, and reformulation. This study categorizes feedback into four distinct types: direct feedback, indirect feedback, focused feedback, and unfocused feedback. Feedback categories are direct or indirect, and focused or unfocused. Ellis (2009) defines direct feedback as explicit teacher corrections, while indirect feedback highlights errors without providing corrections. Ferris (2006) suggests that direct feedback can be provided by identifying errors and offering the right form near the error. In contrast, indirect feedback can be provided using highlighting, circling, coding, or other markings to indicate errors, without offering the proper form. Here, students are tasked with resolving the error that has been identified in their work (Ferris, 2006). The research findings about direct and indirect feedback indicate that students derive advantages from both forms of feedback (see Ferris, 2006, 2011). The terms 'focused' and 'unfocused' feedback refer to the degree to which a teacher selects to comment on specific aspects of writing, or if they provide comments on all or most of the writing issues evident in students' work. Ellis (2009) differentiates between focused and unfocused feedback in the context of feedback provision. In the former, teachers employ a selective approach, focusing on specific language components for remark or correction. Conversely, the latter entails teachers endeavouring to rectify all errors observed in students' work or address all aspects of language performance. Feedback that concentrates on specific errors to be fixed disregards other errors, while feedback that addresses many problems is considered extensive (Ellis, 2008). In summary, Ellis's (2008) classification system emphasises in general the several ways to provide written corrective feedback, each with unique advantages and techniques, so stressing the need of customising feedback to sufficiently improve L2 learners' writing skills.

Ultimately, despite ongoing discussions over WCF in second language acquisition, it is crucial to acknowledge the undeniable evidence that supports its efficacy. Although Truscott (1996) has expressed concerns about the possible disadvantages of WCF, multiple studies confirm its beneficial influence on the writing accuracy and overall performance of L2 learners. By employing a systematic manner of providing feedback, as described by Ellis (2008), educators can customise their responses to accommodate the varied requirements of their students, whether through explicit or implicit techniques, and targeted or broad strategies. Incorporating WCF into L2 teaching practices has a twofold benefit: it enhances the development of writing skills and promotes a more profound comprehension of the language. Therefore, it is an essential element of effective language instruction.

## **2.2. Discrepancy between L2 Teachers' CF Practices and L2 Students' CF Preferences**

Extensive research unequivocally demonstrates a significant misalignment between teachers' instructional practices and students' preferences, highlighting a notable discrepancy between preferred learning techniques and instructional strategies. Cohen

(1987) found a difference between what students want feedback on and what teachers actually deliver feedback on. In addition, [Cohen and Cavalcanti \(1990\)](#) identified a possible inconsistency between the preferences of students on the feedback they want, and the feedback given by their teachers regarding their writing. The discrepancy between the teaching techniques utilised by teachers and the feedback preferences articulated by students can generate sentiments of demoralisation among students. This becomes evident when students get back their writing assignments covered in red marks and notes. As a result, it is possible that their writing skills may not improve significantly. Research has shown that students tend to prefer written feedback from their teachers over other forms of feedback, like verbal feedback or feedback from their peers ([Hyland & Hyland, 2006](#)). They also indicated a preference for more extensive feedback specifically focused on grammar, rather than feedback on other aspects such as content and organization ([Aridah, 2004](#); [Ferris, 1995](#)). Therefore, it is crucial to contemplate the suitable approach that teachers should adopt while giving comments on students' written assignments.

Effective written feedback plays a pivotal role in the learning process by being clear, actionable, and seamlessly integrated into classroom assessments to drive student improvement ([Brookhart, 2008](#)). Clear feedback allows students to understand their strengths and areas for growth, while actionable suggestions guide them on how to make meaningful progress. When incorporated into classroom practices, feedback not only aids in skill enhancement but also helps students perceive it as constructive rather than punitive, reinforcing the importance of effort and practice. Moreover, providing feedback without offering opportunities for its application creates inequities in learning, as students are unable to act on the guidance provided. In the context of L2 development, well-designed feedback is especially critical, as it supports learners in refining their linguistic skills, enhancing accuracy, and building confidence in their communication abilities.

[Gardner et al. \(2010\)](#) emphasize the importance of feedback in enhancing students' learning experiences. Furthermore, they propose that students should be provided with an opportunity to utilise the feedback they get to improve their task performance or demonstrate their comprehension. Using appropriate feedback is an effective strategy to facilitate how students learn and promote their success in the learning process ([Jackson, 2009](#)). Feedback enables students to comprehend their performance on assessment tasks and the rationale behind their grades, while also crucially offering guidance to enhance their learning capabilities ([Obilor, 2019](#)). Therefore, it is imperative to consider the perspectives of students about effective feedback. Studies have asserted that effective feedback is characterized by its ability to empower students to utilize it. The learning outcomes of students might be influenced by their expectations and preferences for specific forms of feedback. This implies that if a student possesses a preference for a particular sort of feedback and perceives it as beneficial, they are more likely to allocate greater attention to the feedback and employ it as a means of enhancing their learning process. In contrast, when a student harbors a dislike or lack of anticipation towards a certain form of feedback, and holds a disbelief in its efficacy, the potential for positive impact may be diminished. In essence, understanding and incorporating students' preferences for feedback will help greatly improve its effectiveness, thus enhancing engagement and learning outcome.

Studies highlight differences between teacher and student preferences for corrective feedback (CF) (e.g., [Brown, 2009](#); [Diab, 2005](#); [Saeb, 2017](#); [Yoshida, 2008](#)). [Lee \(2013\)](#)

found ESL teachers preferred recasts, while advanced learners favoured explicit correction. Similarly, [Roothoof and Breeze \(2016\)](#) noted EFL teachers favoured elicitation, whereas students valued explicit correction and metalinguistic cues. [Yoshida \(2008\)](#) observed Japanese EFL learners preferred time for self-correction, contrasting with teachers' preference for recasts. These findings emphasize the need for teachers to align CF strategies with student preferences to enhance language learning and engagement.

Proficiency is one of the contextual variables that have been used to explain these varying preferences. [Brown \(2009\)](#) discovered that students with higher proficiency levels were more receptive to indirect corrections than those with lower proficiency levels. [Kaivanpanah et al. \(2015\)](#) found that higher-proficiency Iranian learners preferred elicitive corrective feedback (CF) promoting self-correction, unlike lower-proficiency learners. Similarly, [Zhang et al. \(2022\)](#) noted low-proficiency Chinese L2 learners favoured delayed correction more than high-proficiency peers. Additionally, [Yang \(2016\)](#) observed intermediate Chinese L2 learners had more confidence in using clarification requests for pronunciation errors than beginners. Overall, learners' preferences for corrective feedback are much influenced by their level of proficiency; higher proficiency learners usually favour more indirect and elicitive methods, whereas lower proficiency learners usually prefer more explicit and instantaneous corrections.

In addition to students' expectations and preferences for feedback, it is crucial to consider students' comprehension of the feedback they get. Students have the capacity to effectively utilize feedback if they possess a comprehensive understanding of its content and are able to derive meaningful learning outcomes from it. In order to facilitate comprehension and knowledge acquisition, individuals must have a predisposition to favor the feedback that is provided to them. When individuals exhibit aversion towards feedback, they tend to disregard its content, resulting in a lack of engagement and utilization of the feedback for the sake of learning and improvement. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the matter of students' feedback preference as well. However, research on students' feedback preferences is sparse compared to the extensive focus on teachers' practices. Developing writing instructions that align with teachers' practices and students' preferences for WCF is crucial. A framework for providing feedback in the teaching of writing should be employed based on an analysis of students' preferences and teachers' practices. This framework can be referred to as preference-based feedback in the context of writing instruction.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1. Research Approach and Design**

The study used an online survey, a quantitative research methodology, to examine L2 teachers' feedback practices and students' preferences for WCF. The survey findings served as a valuable resource for identifying the feedback strategies employed by teachers in response to students' writing, as well as the feedback preferences expressed by the students. Surveys are the most prevalent way of primary data collection among alternatives. An online survey is a data collection method that employs the internet to collect information from respondents. It entails the development of a questionnaire or survey that is hosted on a web-based platform and subsequently distributed to participants. Participants can access and complete the survey using internet-connected devices, including smartphones, tablets, and computers ([Callegaro & Manfreda, 2021](#)).

The popularity of online surveys has grown significantly in recent years, mostly because of their multitude of advantages. An important benefit is the expanded reach and accessibility provided by online platforms, enabling researchers to engage with a broader and more diverse audience, irrespective of their physical location (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2021; Tourangeau et al., 2013). Furthermore, online surveys are typically more economical in comparison to traditional paper-based or in-person approaches, as they reduce the expenses associated with printing, shipping, and human data entry (Callegaro & Manfreda, 2021; Couper & Peterson, 2017). Online surveys are attractive due to their efficient data collection capabilities, allowing respondents to complete the survey at their convenience. The data is automatically gathered and analysed, thus enhancing their appeal (Revilla et al., 2016; Mavletova & Couper, 2016). Moreover, online surveys have the potential to enhance the quality of data by minimising the likelihood of errors and missing information. In addition, they can increase respondent engagement by incorporating interactive elements and personalised content (Keusch & Zhang, 2017; Revilla et al., 2016). The real-time monitoring and reporting features of online survey platforms enable researchers to promptly modify their surveys and target certain audiences (Callegaro & Manfreda, 2021). In summary, the multitude of advantages offered by online surveys renders them a great instrument for researchers and organisations aiming to gather high-quality data in a streamlined and quick manner.

### 3.2. Instrument

The study used a Google Form Feedback Scale to evaluate teachers' writing feedback practices and students' error correction preferences. The questionnaires were adopted from Aridah et al. (2017) study. In this study, distinct sets of questionnaires were administered to both L2 students and L2 teachers, namely a questionnaire for teachers and a questionnaire for students. These surveys differed in terms of wording and addressing, tailored specifically for each group. The decision had been made to only translate the student questionnaire into the Malay language in order to optimize their comprehension of the questionnaire items. The questionnaire was divided into two sections for teachers, namely Sections A and B. Teacher demographics, including gender, experience, and types of corrective feedback on writing errors, were collected via items 1–6 in Section A of the questionnaire. The teachers' CF practices were examined in Section B of the questionnaire, specifically items 7 to 46. The questionnaire for students was also divided into two sections, Sections A and B. Section A covered students' demographics (gender, age, ethnicity), while Section B examined preferences for WCF among L2 students and teachers, focusing on direct, indirect, focused, and unfocused WCF. A Likert Scale (1 = least preferred, 5 = most preferred) measured preferences. Quantitative analysis identified trends in students' preferences and teachers' feedback practices, with mean scores highlighting the most favoured and frequently used feedback type.

### 3.3. Respondents

A total of 150 second-language (L2) students who successfully completed the Reading and Writing in English course, together with 17 experienced L2 teachers responsible for instructing the course, actively took part in the study (N=167). These respondents were from one of the local universities in East Malaysia. Respondents were selected through purposive opportunistic sampling, targeting individuals with relevant expertise and the ability to articulate their experiences clearly (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Bernard, 2011). Both groups of respondents are the best samples for the study because they have the

experience of getting WCF from their teachers (the L2 learners) and have the knowledge to provide WCF to their students' essay writing (the teachers).

#### 4. Results

The data analysis findings revealed a discrepancy between the instructional methods used by teachers and the written feedback preferences indicated by students. The average scores for each feedback type underscore this finding, as shown in [Table 1](#), which analyses teachers' methods and students' preferences.

Table 1: The Mean Score Between Teachers' WCF Practices and Students' Preferred WCF

Teachers (n=17)		Students (n=150)	
Types of WCF	Mean Score	Types of WCF	Mean Score
Direct	36	Direct	53.9
Indirect	41	Indirect	33.2
Focused	38	Focused	30.7
Unfocused	23	Unfocused	45.7

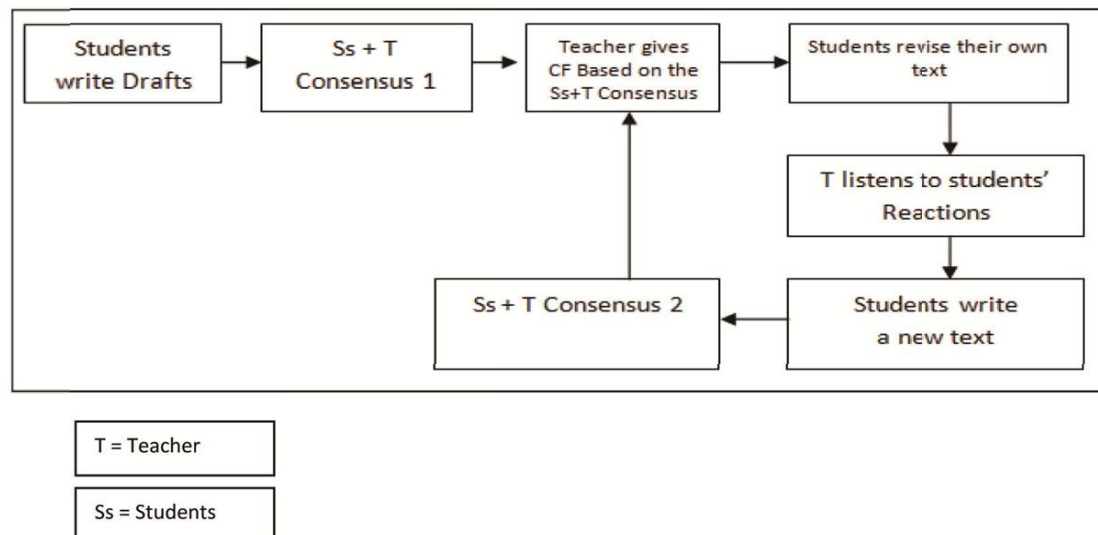
[Table 1](#) reveals that students scored significantly higher in the direct written corrective feedback (WCF) condition, with a mean score of 53.9, compared to teachers, who scored 36. Additionally, students' scores for unfocused WCF averaged 45.7, surpassing the teachers' average of 23. These results indicate that students preferred both direct and unfocused WCF. This indicates that students preferred feedback that was detailed and comprehensive, clearly identifying areas needing improvement (direct WCF). Furthermore, they anticipated that all errors would be corrected without disproportionate focus on any single aspect of writing (unfocused WCF). The findings in [Table 1](#) also indicate that teachers' practices of WCF achieved the highest mean scores in the categories of indirect and unfocused WCF, with scores of 41 and 38, respectively. The students demonstrated a reduced preference for these two types of WCF, reflected in their mean scores of 33.2 for indirect WCF and 30.7 for focused WCF. This preference can be explained by the students' perception of higher mean scores for direct WCF and unfocused WCF. This underscores a significant gap between students' desired approaches and teachers' implemented practices concerning WCF. The results indicate that the L2 teachers in this study predominantly offer indirect WCF and focused WCF, addressing Research Question 1 regarding the types of WCF provided in L2 students' writing, i.e., *How do L2 teachers provide WCF on L2 students' writing?* The students exhibit a preference for direct WCF and unfocused WCF, addressing Research Question 2: *Which forms of WCF are most preferred by L2 students in their writing?* This illustrates the gap between the pedagogical methods employed by teachers and the preferences expressed by students concerning written corrective feedback, addressing Research Question 3: *How well do L2 teachers' WCF practices match the preferences of L2 students?*

The data indicate that some feedback methods provide favourable outcomes, whilst others do not. Therefore, it is essential to formulate writing instructions that correspond with these conclusions. The design of the writing instructions must incorporate both the pedagogical concepts and instructional methodologies of teachers, and the preferences and expectations of students towards WCF. This will guarantee that the feedback from teachers significantly improves students' writing performance. An instructional design for writing that incorporates feedback mechanisms linked with teachers' practices and students' preferences is posited to positively influence students' writing performance. Incorporating students' preferences and expectations in the design of writing education

is expected to benefit both teachers and students. Teachers are likely to augment students' drive and self-esteem, especially with their inclination to engage in essential revisions to boost the quality of their writing. Bridging the gap between student preferences and teacher feedback requires fostering a mutual understanding between teachers and students about the desired types of feedback for future writing assignments.

In relation to the findings, the researchers propose the model by Aridah et al. (2017) for preference-based feedback in writing instruction (see Figure 1). Figure 1 illustrates an instructional model of writing comprising three essential components: writing, feedback, and revision. This writing instruction distinguishes itself by integrating feedback into its design, where the provision of feedback is determined through a consensus between the teacher and students. Teachers and students must establish a mutual understanding of preferred feedback forms to ensure alignment with the teacher's intended approach. This instructional design includes interactive tasks in which the feedback provided in a text may differ based on the level of consensus achieved between the teacher and students.

Figure 1: Aridah et al.'s (2017) Model for Preference-Based Feedback on Writing Instruction



Source: Adopted from Aridah et al. (2017)

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is considered equitable to take into consideration and accommodate the expectations and preferences of students for their own writing, despite the fact that teachers have different perspectives on the components that form effective ways for increasing students' writing skills. There have been a number of research studies that have produced contradictory findings about the efficacy of particular types of feedback in improving the writing skills of students. Despite the fact that some research indicates that these kinds of feedback are ineffectual, other studies have shown that they have the ability to improve the overall quality of the written work that students produce. The potential disparity between students' expectations and teachers' practices and views on the types of feedback that can develop students' writing abilities is one possible explanation for the variety in research findings on the efficacy of feedback. This discrepancy may be associated with the fact that students' expectations differ from teachers' practices and beliefs. A method to instructional writing design that has been offered is described here

in order to cater to the desires of the academic community. The term "preference-based feedback" is the name that has been given to this particular paradigm when it comes to the context of teaching writing. With that being said, additional research is necessary in order to determine whether or not this particular paradigm is effective. The methodology of experimental research is believed to be one of the study designs that may be utilised to demonstrate the effectiveness of the research.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Formal ethical approval was not sought for the study as the research grant was awarded by the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (PPIB), and the respondents were also students of PPIB. However, the researchers obtained verbal consent from the respondents prior to conducting the study.

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank PPIB for granting the Seed Money Grant Scheme, and the respondents of this study for their valuable information.

### **Funding**

This research was funded by PPIB Seed Money Grant Scheme 2022 (Grant No: GPB0004-2022).

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors reported no conflict of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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