

Written Corrective Feedback and EFL Students' Use of Prepositions, Articles, Punctuation and Capitalization

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v24i2.526>

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Received: 12.9.2023

Accepted: 21.3.2024

Published: 6.6.2024

Abstract: This study investigates the effect of direct and indirect written corrective feedback (WCF) on EFL students' use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization. The importance of focusing on WCF is due to its role in enhancing students' writing accuracy and making their writing more suitable to their respective discourse communities. Using a quantitative approach, data was collected over a period of two months in a university in the Sultanate of Oman through pre- and post-tests including two stages of treatments. A total of 45 students voluntarily participated in the study: control group (n=15), direct group (n=15), and indirect group (n=15). While the control group (CG) received no feedback and did not receive interventions, the direct group (DG) received feedback on their pre-test, treatment one and treatment two. For DG, errors were underlined and correct forms were given immediately. The indirect group (IG) received feedback on their pre-test, treatment one and treatment two, as well, but their errors were only underlined with no corrections given to encourage students to find the correct forms themselves. The results of this study suggest that direct written corrective feedback (WCF) is more effective than indirect feedback in improving the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization among Omani undergraduate students majoring in literature. The control group did not show any significant improvements, indicating that written corrective feedback is necessary for improving writing skills among EFL students.

Keywords: articles, capitalization, literary writing, prepositions, punctuation, written corrective feedback

1. Introduction

Written corrective feedback (WCF) is a widely studied pedagogical practice used by language teachers at various stages of teaching (Ferris 1999; Truscott 1996, 1999, 2007; Ellis 2009a) in both L1 (Sommers 1982) and L2 (Hyland 2000; Chandler 2004; Sheen 2007; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima 2008; 2009b; Habeeb 2009; Lee 2009; Mohammed 2012; Diab and Awada 2022; Alnwairan, Al Harthy, Darwish and Yacoub 2023). Research on WCF in L2 has emphasized its contribution to the development of L2 students despite the fact that it takes time and energy (Ferris 1999). Some researchers even claimed that it may have harmful

effects (Truscott 1996, 1999). Thus, pro-correction researchers have studied types of WCF, its in-class practices, and research methods used in various contexts to explore its effectiveness. For example, some researchers looked into the effect of direct WCF, when the teacher underlines the error and gives the correct form (Sheen 2007; Ellis et al. 2008; Ellis 2009b); others looked into the effect of its indirect type when the error is specified but the correct form is not given (Ferris 2004; Hyland and Hyland 2006; Sheen 2007).

Researchers also investigated focused and unfocused WCF. That is, focused WCF is associated with specifying particular grammatical errors to give feedback on (Ellis et al. 2008; Ellis 2009a, 2009b; Sheen, Wright, and Moldawa 2009) and unfocused WCF is associated with dealing with all types of errors (Ellis et al. 2008; Ellis 2009b; Sheen et al. 2009). Despite debates on its effectiveness (Lalande 1982; Sachs and Polio 2007; Sheen 2007; Bitchener and Knoch 2009a, 2009b; Sheen et al. 2009; Benson and DeKeyser 2018; Zhang 2021), WCF has received significant attention; however, the Middle East remains an under-researched area. This study aims to explore the impact of WCF on the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization by EFL students who study English literature at an Omani university. These areas could receive less attention by students who focus on other areas like tenses. Those students are expected to have good command of English. The study also investigates whether direct or indirect WCF has a stronger effect on the accurate use of these language areas and mechanics.

1.1 Research questions

This study attempts to answer these two research questions:

1. Does written corrective feedback lead to significant improvements in the use of prepositions, articles, punctuations, and capitalizations in the writings of EFL Omani University students majoring in literature, compared to a control group?
2. How does the type of written corrective feedback (i.e., direct vs. indirect) affect the accuracy of second language learners' use of prepositions, articles, punctuations, and capitalizations?

1.2 Research objectives

The study aims to address two primary objectives:

1. Evaluate the impact of written corrective feedback on the enhancement of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization usage in the written compositions of EFL Omani University students majoring in literature, in comparison to a control group.
2. Examine and compare the influence of different types of written corrective feedback, specifically direct and indirect, on the accuracy of second language learners' utilization of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization in their written expressions.

2. Literature review

Different research approaches toward written corrective feedback (WCF) have been mainly initiated following Truscott's (1996) piece "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes" and Ferris' (1999) response to that piece. In Truscott's (1996) article, he strongly argued against the value of providing WCF. He considered that it is time-consuming and causes harm to students. It could lead to more writing apprehension and make students less confident of their writing. Moreover, it requires more time on the side of the teachers. He also criticized the research designs and methodologies used as being not robust and inconsistent. Moreover, he emphasized that the findings are contradictory. This criticism pushed researchers to use different methodologies and focus on the effectiveness of different types of WCF in various contexts (Ferris 1999; Hyland 2000; Chandler 2004; Sheen 2007; Ellis et al. 2008; Ellis 2009a, 2009b; Lee 2011; Mia, Chang, and Ma 2023). Yet, this orientation of researching WCF has paid more attention to ESL contexts and left EFL contexts little surveyed. EFL contexts differ from those of ESL in that teachers might not have the institutional capacity to provide feedback as they are more engaged with "adopting conventional feedback practices, collecting single drafts from students, [and] marking student writing laboriously with little student involvement" (Lee 2009: 1). Moreover, teachers might provide feedback on single drafts to justify for their students the grades they earned on their drafts considering the errors made in these drafts. In such contexts, teachers focus on making students produce single drafts without engaging them with multiple drafts. Thus, the current study represents a contribution to understanding how students respond to WCF in an EFL context.

2.1 WCF types

The literature on written corrective feedback (WCF) shows different types used by teachers when providing feedback including direct/indirect, focused/unfocused, metalinguistic, reformulative, or electronic. In terms of directness, teachers can cross out the incorrect forms and provide the correct alternatives (direct WCF) or they can locate, circle, underline, or code errors without correcting them (indirect WCF) (Sheen 2007; Ellis et al. 2008; Ellis 2009b). In this respect, students with limited English proficiency could better benefit from direct WCF as they do not have the language ability to identify the type of error and how to handle it by themselves. Moreover, when errors do not follow predictable patterns, direct WCF is more likely to be useful for students. Yet, indirect WCF could help students with higher proficiency level (Hyland and Hyland 2006) as they engage more with testing their interlanguage hypotheses about language.

Another categorization of WCF is associated with teachers' focus on errors (focused/unfocused). Unlike unfocused WCF which provides a comprehensive marking of errors, focused WCF is associated with selecting a specific number of errors in the students' writing (Ellis et al. 2008; Ellis 2009a, 2009b; Sheen et al. 2009). In this respect, Sheen et al. (2009) and Ellis (2009b) found that such prioritization in focused WCF can lead to better grammatical gains as students' attention is directed towards some errors and thus can process them and figure out

the rules that govern these errors. When there is no focus on a small number of errors, (unfocused WCF), it could be less likely that students are able to handle feedback and internalize the governing rules and apply them in their subsequent writings. Yet, Ellis et al. (2008) found that students benefit from both types of WCF (focused and unfocused). It is important to note here that students' language level can play a role as more proficient students might not have a problem handling unfocused WCF.

Teachers can also use metalinguistic comments (another type of WCF) to guide the students to the nature of the errors (Ellis 2009b). This metalinguistic WCF might take the form of codes or longer comments written at the margins of the paper or over the coded errors. Lalande (1982) found that students provided with codes and code logs performed better in comparison to (traditional) direct correction. Yet, Lalande (1982) emphasized that "a lack of thorough, systematic training during the early stages of foreign language learning" (140) can be problematic in dealing with this type of WCF (see also Lee 2004). Taking into consideration the time spent on providing WCF and the effort invested in it, teachers can also use electronic software databases to give electronic WCF to their students. It helps teachers to save time and enables students to correct themselves especially with "recurrent linguistic problems" (Ellis 2009b: 103). Unlike the strategies and types discussed earlier, students' text reformulation is also used. In this type of WCF, the attention revolves around making students' texts look more like native speakers' written ones (Cohen 1989; Sachs and Polio 2007; Ellis 2009b, 2010). In fact, it can be considered as a stylistic "refinement" rather than a pure correction that high or intermediate level students seek (Cohen 1989).

As light has been shed on the different types of WCF in this section, it is important to revisit some theoretical stances that feed into the practices of feedback provision and students' possible engagement. Thus, the following section will serve this purpose.

2.2 Theoretical stances to WCF and students' engagement

Practicing WCF has raised issues beyond the ones highlighted by Truscott (1996). Truscott argued that as WCF is not effective, then it is harmful and time-consuming. Yet, there is the strand that WCF can take the students' ownership of the text away from them. This view looks at writing as a monologic act (Tardy 2019) leading to appropriating or changing the L2 student-writers' text and thus their intended meaning. This appropriation refers to "the ways in which teachers appropriate student writing by changing the writer's intended meaning (and, therefore, ownership) of a text" (Tardy 2019: 127-8). Unlike the view of writing as monologic, the sociocultural models consider writing as dialogic. In this respect, teacher's feedback works as a dialog between the student as a writer and the teacher as reader. Neglecting the dialogic nature of writing, and the role of teacher's feedback, Truscott (1996) emphasized that this feedback can negatively affect the student's writing proficiency and accuracy. Unlike Truscott's view, Tardy (2019) pointed out that feedback helps to scaffold the students' writing and gives them the voice to fit into the respective disciplinary and discourse communities. It is thus a "textual

negotiation” process that leads to making L2 students capable of belonging to these communities. In this respect, feedback serves as a “joint construction” of the text. (Tardy 2019: 133). Thus, WCF will not take the students’ ownership or agency away. Rather, it will help to shape their ownership or agency. Taking a sociocultural perspective, “[a]ppropriation does not merely act upon writers but is a tool for writers” (Tardy 2019: 139). Considering this dialogic perspective toward L2 writer’s text construction, Canagarajah (2015) stressed that his “feedback served as a positive affordance” (137) to his L2 students.

Another stance to be considered here is students’ engagement with feedback. Ellis (2010) defined engagement as “how learners respond to the feedback they receive” (342). He divided it into three main sub-constructs: cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal. That is, how students perceive that feedback, how they revise texts based on it, and what their attitudes about that feedback are. This engagement is affected by different contextual factors such as the classroom environment and the type of writing tasks. In their study of students’ engagement, Zhang and Hyland (2022) used interviews with the students/ teacher, and text analysis to explore students’ engagement. Three types of feedback were used by the teacher: electronically generated, peer feedback, and teacher feedback. They found that students were highly engaged (affectively, behaviorally, and attitudinally) with feedback due to using this integrated feedback approach. Like Tardy (2019), they emphasized that this integrated feedback helps to provide “diverse readership” to students. Yet, in their study, Zhang and Hyland (2022) found that in order to enhance students’ engagement, teachers need to promote necessary skills, make students aware of these skills, and provide an inclusive learning environment.

On a socio-cognitive level, Han and Hyland (2019) found that students’ engagement with WCF is “a dynamic, socially mediated process [...with reference to] the constant alignment between two parties involved in feedback situations” (405). They stressed that their participants (two L2 students at a Chinese university) adapted their attitudes and revisions to cope with the difficulties associated with their teachers’ implicit feedback. Yet, they argued that teachers should be more explicit in their feedback and their expectations to first build interpersonal relationships with students and second to increase students’ engagement with WCF. Moreover, they pointed out that the different perspectives between the teachers and students can lead to “a lack of engagement with WCF” (Han and Hyland 2019: 391). Like Han and Hyland (2019), Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) emphasized that students’ engagement with WCF was affected by different linguistic and affective factors including the type of feedback, the participants’ attitudes and beliefs, and their learning goals. They found that students engaged more with indirect feedback than with direct as well as they had more retention in the longer term. Their engagement with direct feedback revolved around reading the feedback without deeper internalization. Moreover, the engagement with indirect feedback was associated with students’ processing of the grammatical rules and conventions. This “extensive engagement” also resulted in higher uptake. It is important to note that the participants in this study were of high proficiency level. In Hyland’s (2003) study of students’ engagement with teachers’ feedback, she found that all her

participants engaged with their teachers' feedback. She emphasized that students' beliefs and attitudes play a role in responding to feedback. She added that although "students were well aware that form-focused feedback was unlikely to have an immediate effect, they all had a firm belief that repeated feedback would eventually help them, and that without the feedback they would fail to note the errors and improve" (F. Hyland 2003: 228). Having said so, it is evident that students' engagement is partly associated with negotiating the "pedagogical attitude towards errors" (Brown 2012: 865). Taking these different stances, WCF is thus part of the learning process especially when it falls within "the learner's area of "readiness" (Bitchener and Ferris 2012: 125) especially when considering linguistic accuracy as part of learning a second language.

In Sheen's (2011) study of the role of cognitive (students' aptitude) and affective (students' attitudes and language anxiety) factors in the effectiveness of both oral and written CF, she found that L2 students' aptitudes and attitudes had an impact on their engagement with WCF. Yet, anxiety did not have a significant impact on their engagement with WCF. She emphasized that there is no association between anxiety and WCF "as it is undertaken 'privately'" (Sheen 2011: 150). These findings speak against Truscott's (1996) argument that WCF could raise students' anxiety. Thus, considering the student's language aptitude is important when providing WCF. That is, whether to use direct/ indirect (Hyland and Hyland 2006; Ellis 2009b) or focused/ unfocused WCF (Ellis et al. 2008; Sheen et al. 2009; Zhang 2021), language aptitude is a factor to consider. Moreover, it is also important to realize that students' attitudes are not always fixed as students adapt their attitudes as they proceed in responding to WCF (Han and Hyland 2019).

In the previous section, theoretical stances to WCF and students' engagement have been discussed. Yet, engagement cannot always lead to effective results. So, the following section will provide empirical data in support of WCF.

2.3 Empirical studies in support of WCF

Research shows empirical support for the effectiveness of WCF. Different researchers surveyed the effectiveness of different types of WCF from different perspectives (Lalande 1989; Sachs and Polio 2007; Sheen 2007; Sheen et al. 2009; Bitchener and Knoch 2010). Alnwairan et al. (2023) explored the effect of using direct/indirect WCF on the acquisition of tenses of Omani college students majoring in English Literature. They found that only their direct group had significant gains in comparison to both indirect and control groups. Lalande (1989) compared students' performance in light of traditional (unfocused) direct correction with metalinguistic codes accompanied by error logs. Students provided with error codes performed better in comparison to traditional correction students. Moreover, students provided with traditional correction committed more errors in their posttest. Shintani and Ellis (2013) explored the effect of direct feedback with and without metalinguistic comments on low-intermediate ESL students' use of indefinite articles. Even though neither type was effective in students' later writing, metalinguistic feedback proved more useful. Like Lalande (1989), Shintani and Ellis (2013) attributed the ineffectiveness of direct focused feedback to the students'

inexperience “handling metalinguistic feedback” (300) and focusing only on writing per se. Moreover, Lalande (1989) also emphasized that the lack of consistency in providing WCF could be another reason why feedback did not lead to ultimate gains for the students. Although the participants in Shintani and Ellis’ (2013) study were studying at an American ESL institute where WCF is very common, it seems that training and reminding students of how to deal with feedback seems to be crucial in this respect especially when considering their low level of English. Vornosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) compared the effect of metalinguistic WCF versus direct WCF on EFL low-intermediate level language learners. This study showed significant differences in support of metalinguistic feedback. Like Shintani and Ellis (2013), the findings of Vornosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) were attributed to students’ additional attention, ability to make connections through metalinguistic WCF to their interlanguage, and more effective processing of explicit corrections. That is, providing explicit and direct corrections could help students note the “gaps between the target form and their existing interlanguage forms and this led them to restructure their interlanguages” (Vornosfadrani and Basturkmen 2009: 92).

Taking individual differences (like language aptitude and motivation) perspective into WCF (Robinson 2001; Sheen 2011; Kormos 2012), some research has re-shifted attention toward students’ uptake in light of these differences (Sheen 2007; Shintani and Ellis 2015; Benson and DeKeyser 2018). Shintani and Ellis (2015) explored the role of language-analytic ability (LAA) in mediating WCF. They examined how this ability affected their participants (118 Japanese college students) in relation to WCF on “past hypothetical conditional and indefinite article” (p.110) using two types: direct and metalinguistic. Four stages were used: direct feedback with and without revision/ metalinguistic feedback with and without direct revision. They found significant correlation for grammatical gains in indefinite articles in relation to metalinguistic feedback with revision and with direct feedback without revision. Yet, there was no significant correlation in the case of conditionals for metalinguistic feedback without revision and direct feedback with revision. Interestingly, these correlations were not found in the students’ later writing (after two weeks). They emphasized that for LAA to work, interaction with other factors is key here (the targeted grammatical structure, the possibility of revising or non-revision, and the type of WCF provided). Sheen (2007) also examined the role of LAA on the effect of direct and metalinguistic feedback on students’ use of articles in English. She found that her participants’ grammatical gain was positively “correlated with their aptitude” (247). Her findings also showed that students with high LAA ended with higher gains when provided with metalinguistic WCF. Similar to Sheen’s (2007) study, Benson and DeKeyser (2018) investigated the effect of LAA on students’ accuracy using past and present perfect tenses when provided direct versus metalinguistic WCF. Their results showed that LAA has an effect on mediating both direct and metalinguistic WCF. Participants in both two treatment groups outperformed the control group on the use of the studied grammar structures. Their results support the argument that “LAA is beneficial when learners have to work out the grammar rules for themselves”

(18). Unlike Sheen's (2007) findings, Benson and DeKeyser's (2018) study revealed that direct WCF is more beneficial to students with higher LAA than metalinguistic WCF. Suzuki, Nassaji, and Sato (2019) also focused on the effect of direct and indirect WCF provided in four forms: direct only, direct with metalinguistic comments, indirect only, and indirect with metalinguistic comments. Their findings emphasized that the two groups with the direct WCF had more significant gains in terms of past perfect than the indirect groups. Considering their participants' low level (88 Japanese students), these results showed that direct feedback is more beneficial to such language levels as students might not have the capacity to figure out the grammatical rules governing these areas. Yet, there were no significant gains for the indefinite articles across the four groups.

Taking a different perspective, Sheen et al. (2009) examined the effect of the use of unfocused and focused WCF on L2 students. Both treatment groups resulted in higher gains compared to the control group. Yet, the focused group outperformed the unfocused group in its grammatical accuracy for the studied grammar structures (copular *be*, prepositions, articles, and regular/irregular past forms). These findings resonate with results from Zhang's (2021) study in which he examined mid-focused versus highly focused WCF provided to fifty-eight Thai low-intermediate English level students. He found that both groups performed more significantly than the control group on the use of regular past verbs but there were no significant differences in the use of irregular past verbs. Using a different approach, Sachs and Polio (2007) explored the effectiveness of three different methods: (direct) error correction, native-text reformulation, and reformulation with think-aloud. They focused on 15 high-intermediate L2 students. They found that direct WCF resulted in more significant gains than reformulation. Moreover, reformulation led to more significant results than reformulation with think-aloud while revising. Yet, they included a control group later in their study in an attempt to reduce students' possible memorization. It seems that their design was affected by SLA research stance and students' attention capacities.

Unlike the studies discussed above, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) explored the effect of direct WCF accompanied with metalinguistic commentary (oral and/or written) using a longitudinal design (ten months). They focused on the acquisition of in/definite articles of fifty-two low-intermediate L2 students. They had four groups: a control group and three treatment groups. Their treatment groups received three types of feedback: direct WCF only, direct WCF with metalinguistic comments, and direct WCF with oral comments. All their three treatment groups showed significant differences in comparison to the control group. Interestingly, there were no significant differences across their treatment groups. These findings speak against Truscott's (2007) argument in which he deemphasized the role of WCF and considered teaching as a sole factor in the development of students' writing accuracy. That is, although the respective participants in Bitchener and Knoch's (2010) study received similar teaching except the interventional WCF for ten months, their control group did not show development in the use of articles.

2.4 Teachers' stances to WCF

The studies discussed in the previous section all focused on how students respond to teachers' WCF. Yet, teachers' approaches to providing WCF play an important role in students' response to that WCF. In this respect, Truscott (1996, 1999) emphasized the inconsistency of WCF provided to students. Lalande (1982) also pointed out that students sometimes receive feedback that is "faulty, incomplete, or ineffective" (146). Part of this faultiness can stem from inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their real practices. In this respect, Hyland and Anan (2006) explored how a Japanese university student's authentic written text received WCF conducted by three groups: native English EFL teachers, EFL Japanese teachers, and native English non-teachers. The findings showed that EFL Japanese teachers focused more on "stylistic variations as errors" while native English EFL teachers focused more on "features of formality and academic appropriacy" (509). This reflected how different teachers prioritize their WCF based on their beliefs and attitudes about what needs to be corrected and what does not. In Lee's (2004) study of teachers' and students' perspectives toward WCF in Hong Kong secondary classrooms, she found that there were discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and their practices. Even though "99% of them believed that students should learn to locate and correct their own errors" (299), the majority of those teachers marked students' errors comprehensively. Despite the fact that most of the students wanted their teachers to mark all their errors, Lee (2004) emphasized that this stemmed from students' expectations which were "often shaped by teacher practice" (302). Moreover, almost half of the teachers' practices in error correction were inaccurate and thus misleading. These findings raise two issues: institutional expectations and teacher training. Having said so, teachers reported that they are required by their school panels to mark all students' errors. This point is also supported by Lee's (2009) study that institutional obstacles shape teachers' practices to a large extent, especially in an EFL context. Moreover, teacher training plays an important role in helping teachers understand what error to focus on and what types of feedback to use with consideration to timing and students' levels. This point is also highlighted by Ellis (2009b), who called for guidelines that help teachers understand the art of providing WCF to maximize students' grammatical accuracy gains in the long term and make them more independent writers.

Surveying the literature, it is important to note that certain contexts have been under-explored. Taking the Arab context, this study aims to contribute to enriching the literature and showing the effectiveness of using WCF in such a context. The following section will highlight the methodology and research design used in the current study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Designing an appropriate research methodology for conducting a study is crucial. This is achieved through following a systematic protocol for selecting a suitable design, sample recruiting, data collecting, and a proper analysis for trustworthy

results. Further, the importance of careful research design is to avoid any type of impact on the research's "validity, reliability, and replicability" (Abbuhl, Gass, and Mackey 2013: 116). Therefore, a quasi-experimental research method with pre-test, application of intervention, and post-test was designed to be applied to this study. Applying this design aimed to measure the causal association between independent and dependent variables after applying an intervention (Stratton 2019). Another reason for applying a quasi-experimental design is the time needed to apply an intervention to measure its effects on improving the outcomes and to compare the results of the experimental group to the control group. This study sought to investigate the causal relationship between the type of written corrective feedback given to Omani college students and the improvement in their corrective use of prepositions, articles, capitalization and punctuation marks in writing about literature.

3.2 Selection of participants

Out of 187 students in the BA in Literature program at an Omani university, 59 participants contributed to this study. Those 59 students, who represent 32.6 percent of the total population in this institution, were recruited based on the selected-self method from three different classes. They formed three different groups, the WCF direct group (20 students), WCF indirect group (19 students), and the controlled group (19 students). The self-select sampling method is a voluntary process of nominating oneself to be a part of a study after the study aims and process are advertised or announced by a researcher. In general, participants who are interested in a study, volunteer to participate, which saves the researcher's time and effort to find samples through randomized selection in such an interventional study. Further, it assists in gathering adequate information in a short period. Alvi (2016) stated that one of the concerns that may be taken against this approach is the challenge in generalizing the findings of such research.

In such studies, it is vital to manipulate or reduce the effects of any extraneous factors that may lead to "skew measurements and cause results to be invalid or unreliable" (Abbuhl et al. 2013: 18). Therefore, the students were involved in the current study based on these inclusion criteria: a) aged between 17-22; b) they should be bachelor's degree students; c) they are in the literature major; d) they did not join a language or writing improvement programs previously, and e) are taught by the same instructor in the Spring semester 2022-2023. These criteria played a partial role in creating homogeneity to assert internal validity. The students were distributed among the three groups randomly.

3.3 Ethical protocol

Ethical research consideration is one of the fundamental principles to be taken into account when recruiting participants. After the research topic and procedure were explained to students, an approval was gained from the university where the students study. Next, they were given consent forms to obtain their approval for their participation. The consent form included the aim of the study and the expected

outcomes. Further, it included the reason for their selection to contribute to the study and a part to include their demographic information.

3.4 The administration of intervention

Prior to the implementation of the study, the researchers conducted three preparation meetings. In the first meeting, the study proposal and major elements were discussed. For instance, the sample size, inclusion criteria, distribution of work among researchers, suggested date to start the intervention with a pre-test. In the second meeting, further discussion took place about the materials that will be used in the intervention, types of feedback that will be provided to groups, and the post-test suggested date. In the third meeting, the entire procedure of intervention and other elements and the readiness to start were revised.

The study went through three stages: first, the pre-test stage. At this point, students were given short children stories to read. Dr. Wafa Al Shamsi, a well-known author of Omani children's literature, is the author of these tales. These stories include 15-21 pages. The students in the three groups were given 15-20 minutes to read a story that was selected by the instructor. Next, they were given additional time, about 30 minutes, to write an essay of 250-300 words about the story they read. They had to write the essay in English whereas the story is written in their mother tongue, Arabic. The reason for given them the stories in the mother tongue was to make them through the process of thinking about their ideas, organizing them, then writing them in English. The storyline, characters, climax (if any), exposition, and resolution of the story had to be included in the students' essay. In addition, the students were required to compose 150–250- words of a quick reflection that included their thoughts of the story. Their interpretations of the reflection included its themes and any other linguistic, stylistic, and literary elements. In stage two, students' written work was evaluated in terms of the use of prepositions, capitalization, articles, and punctuation marks. The feedback differed from one group to another. For instance, the direct WCF group received explicit and prompt written comments and grammatical corrections. Errors were highlighted, some were crossed out, some were given alternatives for fixes, some were given some capitalization for uncapitalized words or nouns, some were circled, and some were given some punctuation, like full stops.

Feedback was handed to participants in the indirect WCF group that acknowledged issues but did not offer any fixes. On their writing assignments, the control group did not get any comments. Following that, errors made by students in each group were counted and noted in the pre-test. It is important to highlight that the capitalization count was carefully evaluated because it was discovered that some students had written uppercase letters that should not have been capitalized. It was discovered after a rigorous examination of students' writing that some of them shared this writing style. As a result, the capitalization was incorrect when: a) letters with two distinct shapes, such as (n-N-d-D-e-E), were written in a non-capitalization position; and b) the capitalization was absent in appropriate places, such as at the start of sentences and in Proper Names beginnings.

Fourth, in the third stage of the study and in seven lectures, the direct group received constructive verbal feedback for 15 to 20 minutes, which was the intervention. With a focus on prepositions, punctuation marks, capitalization, and articles, the participants in the direct WCF group received rapid and unambiguous grammatical corrections for their writing problems. Students received both collective and specific comments on the frequent errors. Furthermore, each student received targeted comments. If there were any ambiguous remarks or points, they were encouraged to voice their thoughts and questions. By focusing on the prevalent errors, this support sought to scaffold them so they would not repeat their mistakes and enhance their writing and language proficiency. The participants in the indirect WCF group received written feedback that identified issues but were not offered any recommendations for fixing them. This assistance was supposed to draw attention to the primary mistakes that students should steer clear of making. The control group's written work received no feedback.

Fifth, students underwent evaluation by the same researcher to receive further written feedback after completing two writing attempts over a five-week period. Additionally, they had to write 150–200 words of reflections on each story they had read. While they had the story in their hands, they were instructed to discuss the story, its themes, and any linguistic, stylistic, or literary elements in their reflection. Lastly, to compare the outcomes of the pre-test and post-test, students in all three groups were given a post-test written prompt at the conclusion of the intervention period. This was done in the same manner as the pre-test. Every student was assigned a new tale to write about from the one they had written for the pre-test. The students' written work was collected, and it was evaluated using the same method of noting errors as the pre-test.

3.5 Data analysis

The decision to assess students' proficiency with prepositions, punctuation marks, capitalization, and articles was made as a result of noticing common writing mistakes made by some Omani students. It was theorized that with some assistance and direction from the instructor, students should be able to develop in this area of linguistics. Finally, this study is seen as a foundation for future research aimed at enhancing other facets of students' language proficiency in Omani context. The works of 15 students from each group were randomly chosen for statistical analysis. The quantity of mistakes committed by students on the pre-test and post-test were contrasted. As will be explained in the following sections, this comparison helped to show the extraordinary degree and type of improvement in the students' language proficiency as a result of the intervention's application in both the experimental and controlled groups.

4. Findings and discussion

This study attempts to answer these two research questions:

1. Does written corrective feedback lead to significant improvements in the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization in the writings

of EFL Omani University students majoring in literature, compared to a control group?

2. How does the type of written corrective feedback (i.e., direct vs. indirect) affect the accuracy of second language learners' use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization?

The pretest writings of our participants indicated different types of errors in the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization. The following is a list of mistake examples:

- She has started to write *a* stories. [article]
- *her* mom loves to stay on social media. [Capitalization]
- In conclusion the story is very useful [punctuation]
- Nowadays we can see how social networkings ... [punctuation]
- From my point of view I see that [punctuation]
- The theme is sad and *i* think ... [punctuation and capitalization]
- So *i* think this story [punctuation and capitalization]
- But her parents immediately refuse of this idea [Preposition]
- Jojo remind her "No one care Jojo" [Preposition]
- I will summarize about the story. [Preposition]
- She gets taired of browsing in the social media [Preposition and punctuation]
- In one day and everyday Jojo she like panting and drawing see, tress and garden, after her mother she take a pitcher and posted in a social media like instgram and snapchat [Run on]
- When you live as parent... [article]
- Take care about our children... [preposition]

We counted these mistakes and to report our findings, a one-sample t test using SPSS was run to examine if any of the differences between the pre- and the post-tests were significant. We report our findings below:

Table 1: Control group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Significance
Pair 1	Preposition Pretest	2.7333	15	3.03472	.78356	.719
	Preposition Posttest	2.5333	15	1.68466	.43498	
Pair 2	Articles Pretest	.4667	15	.51640	.13333	.719
	Articles Posttest	.4000	15	.63246	.16330	
Pair 3	Punctuation and Capitalization Pretest	1.8000	15	1.65616	.42762	.313

	Punctuation and Capitalization Posttest	1.4667	15	1.68466	.43498	
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The control group results, as in Table 1 above, show that there was no significant improvement in the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization between the pretest and posttest measures. The mean score for prepositions decreased slightly from 2.7333 to 2.5333, the mean score for articles decreased slightly from 0.4667 to 0.4000, and the mean score for punctuation and capitalization decreased slightly from 1.8000 to 1.4667. These changes were not statistically significant, as indicated by the non-significant p-values of .719 for the first two pairs and .313 for the last pair.

Table 2: Direct group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Significance
Pair 1	Preposition Pretest	1.8667	15	1.45733	.37628	.058
	Preposition Posttest	.9333	15	.96115	.24817	
Pair 2	Articles Pretest	.5333	15	1.06010	.27372	.189
	Articles Posttest	.1333	15	.35187	.09085	
Pair 3	Punctuation and Capitalization Pretest	11.5333	15	8.29687	2.14224	<.001
	Punctuation and Capitalization Posttest	1.6000	15	1.91982	.49570	

The direct group results, as in Table 2 above, show significant improvements in only one of the three areas of writing skills. For prepositions, while the mean score decreased from 1.8667 to 0.9333, the one sample t test indicated that the finding is not significant, as indicated by the p-value of .058. It is almost significant, but not. Similarly, for articles, the mean score decreased from 0.5333 to 0.1333, indicating a huge improvement in the use of articles by the participants, but yet not significant as the p-value is .189. However, for punctuation and capitalization, the mean score declined dramatically from 11.5333 to 1.6000, indicating a significant improvement in the participants' writing skills in this area. The p-value of <.001 suggests that this improvement is highly significant.

Table 3: Indirect group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Significance
Pair 1	Preposition Pretest	1.0000	15	.92582	.23905	.469
	Preposition Posttest	1.2667	15	.96115	.24817	
Pair 2	Articles Pretest	.8000	15	1.01419	.26186	.550
	Articles Posttest	.6000	15	.63246	.16330	
Pair 3	Punctuation and Capitalization Pretest	2.0000	15	2.10442	.54336	.349
	Punctuation and Capitalization Posttest	1.4667	15	1.59762	.41250	

The indirect group results, as in Table 3 above, show some improvements in the use of prepositions, articles, and punctuation/capitalization, although the improvements are not as significant as those seen in the direct group. For prepositions, the mean score increased from 1.0000 to 1.2667, indicating a slight improvement in the participants' use of prepositions; the p-value of .469 suggests that this deterioration is not statistically significant. For the articles, the mean score decreased from 0.8000 to 0.6000, indicating a slight improvement in the use of articles by the participants. The p-value of .550 still suggests that this improvement is not statistically significant. Similarly, for punctuation and capitalization, the mean score decreased slightly from 2.0000 to 1.4667, indicating a slight improvement in the participants' writing skills in this area, and the p-value of .349 suggests that this improvement is not statistically significant.

Overall, these results suggest that direct written corrective feedback is more effective than indirect feedback in improving the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization among Omani EFL literature students. The control group did not show any significant improvements, indicating that written corrective feedback is necessary for improving writing skills among EFL students. The findings suggest that direct written corrective feedback may be a more effective pedagogical tool for improving writing skills among EFL students.

In essence, the study's findings convey a clear message: direct written corrective feedback proves to be more effective than its indirect counterpart in enhancing the proficiency of EFL students, particularly in the domains of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization. The absence of notable improvements in the control group underscores the importance of incorporating written corrective feedback into the learning process for enhancing writing skills among EFL students. This suggests that a direct approach to providing corrective feedback holds significant promise as a pedagogical tool for fostering improvement

in the writing abilities of students learning English as a foreign language. The results affirm the value of targeted feedback in the language learning context, emphasizing its potential to contribute meaningfully to students' skill development.

Our study's alignment with the broader literature on Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is reinforced by several noteworthy studies, enriching the understanding of effective feedback practices. Alnwairan et al.'s (2023) investigation into direct and indirect WCF on Omani college students mirrors our emphasis on direct feedback, revealing significant gains exclusively in the direct group, in contrast to the indirect and control groups. In addition, Lalande's (1989) exploration of traditional direct correction versus metalinguistic codes provides further support for our findings. The emphasis on metalinguistic feedback's effectiveness, as evidenced by improved performance when students were provided with error codes, aligns cohesively with our study's recognition of the value of detailed and informative feedback.

On a similar vein, Shintani and Ellis's (2013) research, which found metalinguistic feedback to be more useful in improving low-intermediate ESL students' writing skills, complements our study's focus on the significance of such feedback. The acknowledgment of students' inexperience in handling direct feedback, as noted by Shintani and Ellis, resonates with our emphasis on the nuanced role of feedback types and the necessity of training students for effective engagement. Vornosfadrani and Basturkmen's (2009) comparative study on metalinguistic and direct WCF for EFL low-intermediate learners aligns seamlessly with our findings. Their support for metalinguistic feedback, attributed to enhanced attention and effective processing of explicit corrections, reinforces our emphasis on the nuanced and context-specific nature of feedback effectiveness.

These integrated studies collectively contribute to the broader discourse on WCF practices, emphasizing the need for specific feedback approaches in language learning environments. The synthesis of our study with these diverse investigations underscores the nuanced factors influencing the effectiveness of WCF and reinforces the importance of considering various elements for optimal pedagogical outcomes.

4.1 Pedagogical implications

Based on the findings of this study, we can provide the following pedagogical implications:

- Our findings suggest that WCF can be an effective tool to improve the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization in EFL students' writing. Therefore, instructors should consider incorporating this approach into their teaching practice.
- It is recommended for instructors to use a combination of direct and indirect feedback. The results of our study indicate that both direct and indirect feedback can be effective in improving writing skills. Therefore, instructors should consider using a combination of both types of feedback in their instruction.

- Feedback should be tailored to specific writing needs. Our findings suggest that different areas of writing may require different types of feedback. Instructors should consider analyzing their students' writing in order to identify their specific needs and challenges, and tailor their feedback accordingly.
- Instructors should provide timely and constructive feedback and should ensure that feedback is provided in a timely manner, so that students have the opportunity to apply it to their writing. Feedback should also be constructive and specific, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in the student's writing.
- Instructors should implement process-oriented writing instruction by adopting a process-oriented approach to teaching writing, which emphasizes the importance of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This approach can help students develop their writing skills in a more holistic and comprehensive manner.

4.2 Limitations

There are several limitations to our study. They are:

- Sample size: The sample size for our study is relatively small, with only 15 participants in each group. This limits the generalizability of our findings to other populations and contexts.
- Homogeneity of the sample: The study only included Omani university students majoring in literature, which limits the generalizability of the results to other groups of EFL learners.
- Short duration of the study: The study was conducted over a relatively short period of time (two months) which may not be sufficient to determine the long-term effects of written corrective feedback on EFL students' writing skills.
- Limited scope of writing skills: The study only focused on four specific areas of writing skills (prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization), which limits the generalizability of the results to other areas of writing skills.
- Potential for testing effects: The use of pre- and post-tests may have created a testing effect, where students improved their scores simply due to the act of being tested rather than due to the intervention.
- Lack of a qualitative component: our study did not include a qualitative component, which limits the understanding of how students perceived the effectiveness of the written corrective feedback they received.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the role of direct and indirect written corrective feedback in improving Omani literature students' use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization. The study attempted to answer two research questions. The first one explored the significant improvements in the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization in the writings of EFL University Omani students majoring in literature, compared to a control group, through written corrective

feedback. The other research question looked into the effect differences between the two types of written corrective feedback (i.e., direct vs. indirect) on the accuracy of second language learners' use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization.

The findings of this study indicate that direct written corrective feedback is more effective than indirect feedback in improving the use of prepositions, articles, punctuation, and capitalization among EFL Omani literature students. We recommend that more research replicates our study with a larger and more diverse sample of EFL learners to increase the generalizability of the findings. We also hope that researchers conduct longitudinal studies to investigate the long-term effects of written corrective feedback on EFL students' writing skills. In addition, incorporating a qualitative component to the study to gather information about how students perceive the effectiveness of written corrective feedback is important and can help us identify potential barriers or challenges.

Also, it is recommended that researchers compare the effectiveness of written corrective feedback with other forms of feedback, such as oral feedback or peer feedback and examine the impact of individual differences, such as language proficiency and motivation, on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback. Finally, it is suggested that researchers investigate the potential for technology-assisted feedback and AI (Artificial Intelligence) feedback, such as automated feedback or online feedback, to improve EFL students' writing skills.

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