Title

Teachers' Perceptions about Feedback and Their Feedback Practices: Are They in Line?

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What Factors Shape Teachers' Feedback Practices?

The Case of an Iranian EFL Context

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We conducted a qualitative study with 14 Iranian EFL teachers to explore their perceptions about feedback and to investigate the factors that mediated their translation into feedback practices. As our analysis indicated, students' expectations, teachers' perceptions, institutional guidelines, and parents' expectations were important constituents of our teachers' perceptions. Our analysis also suggested that our participants' perceptions were comprised of a network of variables, and these variables were at times conflicting. For instance, while the teachers valued feedback on content and organization, their students preferred grammar-centered written feedback. These student expectations were also reported to affect English institutions' guidelines regarding the provision of written feedback. However, our findings showed that students' expectations were the dominant factors which ultimately determined the translation of our teachers' perceptions to their feedback practices. Overall, the findings indicate that our teachers' perceptions are rarely the basis for their practice, primarily because of dominant student perceptions.
Keywords: Written feedback; teacher cognition; teacher perceptions; student preferences.

Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) has received extensive theoretical attention (e.g., Schmidt, 1990), and many studies have concluded that CF can increase learners' grammatical accuracy in second language (L2) writing (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010; Ferris, 1999, 2004). In fact, many CF studies have utilized experimental designs to provide pedagogical implications for writing instructors--what Ferris (2014) calls best feedback practices.

However, Lee (2013) notices that this empirical emphasis neglects the realities of providing CF on student writing in classroom contexts. Similarly, Gurzynski-Weiss (2016) notes that the existing literature mostly examines CF after its provision, thereby not accounting for the decisions L2 teachers make before giving feedback. Ferris (2014) also concludes that, while empirical results have been translated into CF practices for teachers, little is known about whether such pedagogical implications are used and usable in the L2 classroom. Therefore, Mao and Lee (2020) suggest that the CF literature can benefit from more qualitative studies on teachers' perceptions, beliefs, values, and priorities before, during, and after providing CF.

Lee (2013) argues that studies on teachers' perceptions about feedback remain underrepresented in the feedback literature, partially because teachers are generally regarded as passive users of pedagogical recommendations (Lee, 2008), while their own perceptions, beliefs, and values remain little-known. We are aware of several studies which have investigated teachers' feedback-related perceptions and their actual practices (e.g., Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019), but, to our best knowledge, less is known about the decisions teachers make in the process of providing CF, as well as about the factors which influence these decisions. Therefore, our study aimed to explore how several factors affected teachers' CF practices and the decisions which influenced such practices.

Teachers' Feedback-related Perceptions and Practices

Borg (2001) defines teachers' perceptions and beliefs as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p. 186). Basturkmen (2012) notes that teacher perceptions both contribute to the formation of a value system and mediate whether pedagogical recommendations are actually practiced. Nonetheless, the extent to which this value system provides the basis of their practices remains vague (Phipps & Borg, 2009), especially when accounting for factors such as teaching context, teachers' individual differences, institutional policies (Basturkmen, 2012), learners' needs, and broader sociocultural norms (e.g., Lee, 2016; Lee, Vahabi, & Bikowski, 2018). The importance of understanding these realities of providing CF has, therefore, led researchers (e.g., Edgington, 2020; Yu, 2021) to advocate for L2 teachers' reflective feedback practices to increase their awareness of their own perceptions, their students' needs/interests, contextual factors, and sociocultural considerations.

Aiming to provide empirical evidence on the factors which shape teachers CF-related perceptions, value, decisions, and practices, we review several relevant studies here. For instance, Ferris (2014) examined composition instructors' perceptions and practices, using data from questionnaires, interviews, and textual analysis. She reported that the participants utilized learner-centered feedback practices (e.g., peer-feedback) and provided individualized feedback. Lee et al. (2018) examined the CF practices of L2 teachers and concluded that the teachers' CF primarily corrected grammatical errors, was explicit, and was delivered directly. These studies describe

teachers' feedback-related perceptions and practices, although the factors which shape teachers' perceptions, decisions, values, and practices remain unexplored.

Several studies have delved more deeply into the relationship between teachers' CF-related perceptions and practices. In their study, Montgomery and Baker (2007) concluded that teachers' CF-related perceptions and practices tended to diverge. For instance, the teachers provided more grammar feedback, but less content feedback, than they thought they did. Mao and Crosthwaite (2019) studied the areas in which teachers' CF perceptions and practices misaligned in China. The authors concluded that these teachers' practices somewhat aligned with their perceptions. For example, these teachers provided more CF on local issues, although they thought that they paid more attention to global issues. Also, the teachers provided more indirect CF, though they thought that their CF practices were mostly direct. These discrepancies were seemingly caused by contextual factors (e.g., time constraint) and teachers' awareness of their learners' CF-related preferences. Lee (2009) examined teachers' feedback-related perceptions and practices in Hong Kong and identified 10 discrepancies; her participants, for instance, provided more grammar feedback than what they reported, employed comprehensive feedback despite preferring selective feedback, and gave teacher-dominated feedback despite valuing learner autonomy. Lee highlighted the importance of institutional guidelines in shaping feedback practices in Hong Kong, although she partially attributed these practices to teachers' own perceptions. In another study in Hong Kong, Lee (2009) explored the discrepancies between teachers' feedback perceptions and practices. Lee reported that her participants frequently deviated from recommended feedback practices by using single-draft assignments and grammar-centered CF. She identified contextual factors, teachers' training, and teachers' academic background as the variables which affected whether teachers actually did what they perceived to be good practices.

In addition, Caswell (2018) took a teacher-centered, reflective approach and examined a teacher's affective reactions to her CF practices. This study showed how the teacher reported constant tension between what she perceived to be ideal (her own perceptions, beliefs, and values) and what she viewed as necessary (institutional expectations). The findings from a think-aloud protocol showed that this teacher generally experienced a variety of emotions (e.g., anger and concern) when providing feedback on student writing, and that the teacher felt confusion when balancing the weight of her own perceptions and institutional guidelines. These studies suggest that teachers' feedback-related practices and the decisions that guide these practices may be shaped by teachers' values, contextual variables, institutional guidelines, and students' preferences. There is, nevertheless, little evidence on whether some of these variables supersede the others, and if so, what factors lead to a hierarchical relationship among these factors.

To our best knowledge, the only investigation which has explored the hierarchical nature of the factors which affect teachers' CF-related decisions was conducted by Gurzynski-Weiss (2016), though her study explored teachers' *oral* feedback practices. Gurzynski-Weiss examined the feedback practices of 32 Spanish teachers, focusing on the factors which influences their perceptions, beliefs, values, and practices. The data from videotaped grammar-centered sessions and stimulated recalls showed that "contextual (e.g., error type), learner (e.g., perceived student

ability), and instructor factors (e.g., research background) influenced their decision whether or not to provide feedback, as well what type(s) to provide, and when" (p. 255). These teachers' own language backgrounds and professional training were among the important determiners of their feedback-related decisions which, in turn, shaped their practices. Although this study provides valuable insights into teachers' CF-related decision-making process, the examined factors are all teacher-centered. In the current study, we aim to examine the differential effects of learner-centered variables, teacher-centered variables, and institutional guidelines, among others, on teachers' feedback-related decisions and ensuing practices.

The Present Study

The feedback literature provides ample pedagogical recommendations for writing instructors (Ferris, 2014), but teachers may or may not follow those recommendations (Lee, 2009). This draws our attention to the importance of exploring the factors which shape teachers' CF-related decisions and actual practices. We acknowledge that several studies (e.g., Lee, 2008, 2009) point to the respective importance of teachers' beliefs, teacher training, and institutional guidelines, but these studies are limited to only a few L2 contexts (e.g., Hong Kong) and the relative importance of these factors have yet to be examined. As we have discussed earlier, L2 writing teachers have been mostly regarded as passive consumers of CF-related pedagogical recommendations. By examining teachers' beliefs, ideals, aspirations, and preferences, we can also understand the myriad of variables that help translate teachers' CF-related values into actual practices. Therefore, we set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors reported by Iranian writing teachers as shaping their CF-related decisions and practices?
2. As reported by these teachers, what is the relative importance of these factors?

Methodology

Operationalization of Variables

In the present study, we operationalized our two main variables, teacher perceptions and corrective feedback, as follows:

Teacher perceptions: Collection of propositions teachers hold to be true and use as basis for teaching (Borg, 2011).

Corrective feedback: Teacher commentary on various aspects of student writing, including on content, organization, and language issues (Shintani & Ellis, 2015).

Context and Participants

Our participants were Persian-speaking English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers (eight women and six men) from two language institutes where the first author had prior teaching experience. These institutes are private language schools affiliated with a large national university in Tehran, Iran. The students are above 18 years old and come from various linguistic, academic,

and cultural backgrounds. We invited 27 teachers, and 14 of them agreed to take part in the interviews. All the teachers were required to teach, assess, and provide feedback on student writing in general English courses that equally covered speaking, listening, reading, and writing. We recruited instructors from such classes because it is very rare for language institutes in Iran to offer writing courses similar to composition classes typical in the United States. Table 1 provides some background information on the participants (names are pseudonyms).

Table 1
Participant Profiles (N = 14)

Personal background			Academic background		Teaching background	
Name	*Gender*	*Age*	*Education*	*Related coursework*	*TTC*	*Years*
Ali	M	30s	MA in TEFL	Testing and Teaching	Yes; no CF	Nine
Amir	M	20s	MA in TEFL	Teaching and Testing	Yes; CF	Five
Esi	M	20s	MA in TEFL	SLA and Testing	Yes; no CF	Four
Fatima	F	30s	MA in Ling.	Testing and SLA	Yes; no CF	Eight
Mahya	F	30s	MA in Engl. Lit.	None	Yes; CF	Nine
Mamad	M	30s	MA in TEFL	Teaching and SLA	No	12
Mona	F	30s	MA in Ling.	Teaching	Yes; CF	Nine
Niloo	F	30s	MA in TEFL	Teaching and Testing	Yes; CF	10
Pari	F	30s	BA in Engl. Lit.	Teaching	Yes; CF	13
Parima	F	30s	MA in TEFL	Teaching and Testing	Yes; CF	Nine
Payman	M	20s	MA in TEFL	Teaching and Testing	No	Eight
Pedram	M	30s	MA in TEFL	Teaching and Testing	No	Nine
Ramtin	M	30s	MBA	None	Yes; no CF	14
Saeed	M	30s	MA in TEFL	Testing and Teaching	Yes; CF	6.5

Note: TTC = Teacher training courses; ling = linguistics; TEFL = teaching English as a foreign language; Engl. Lit = English Literature; SLA = second language acquisition.

Data Collection

Because our study explored teachers' perceptions about the factors which influenced their decisions and ensuing practices, we think that qualitative interviews were an appropriate data collection instrument. Qualitative interviews have been considered as uniquely advantageous in exploring perceptions, beliefs, and thoughts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), which is why many L2 writing studies (e.g., Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2009; Zhu, 2004) have incorporated these interviews. To develop our interview questions, we asked several experienced teachers (excluded from the final analyses) to generate ideas related to writing and feedback in a brainstorming session. These ideas underwent further analysis, and some of them were used in the interviews. After piloting the interview questions with the teachers who had participated in the brainstorming session, the questions were finalized. The final version of the interviews addressed areas such as students' expectations and preferences (Question 4), teachers' perceptions and values (Question 5), and institutional guidelines (Question 6), as noted in the Appendix.

The interviews were conducted over the course of one month, at the participants' convenient time and location. We asked the teachers to choose three students papers they had recently provided feedback on to 1) see what types of feedback they had provided and 2) think about the factors which shaped their decisions and practices. We did not incorporate data from these student papers because our study did not aim to uncover the actual discrepancies between teachers' perceptions and practices. The interviews were conducted in Persian to allow the participants to express their ideas more freely and eloquently than they might have been able to in English. The first few minutes of the interviews were spent on discussing any questions about the study. Then, the interview questions investigated the effects of several variables on shaping the teachers' CF-related decisions and practices. Finally, any remaining questions were addressed. The interviews were approximately 45-75 minutes and recorded on a personal device.

Data Analysis

We transcribed the data in Persian and then translated them to English. Because the second author is not a native speaker of Persian, 20% of the data in Persian were co-coded by an experienced Persian-speaking EFL teacher, and the two coding schemes showed strong agreement ($r = .98$). Coding interview data has been shown to be an effective tool in identifying themes and categories underlying ideas, values, and thoughts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). We identified the thematic categories in our data by consulting similar studies such as Harwood et al. (2009). We first coded the themes in each individual interview and made a list of these ideas. The lists were then compared to create an initial coding scheme. We took into account any mention of the differential effects of these factors on teachers' CF-related decision and practices. After several rounds of revisions, our final coding scheme was finalized. We have presented our coding in the Findings section.

Findings

In the following subsections, we present our coding scheme, provide some representative excerpts, and add our interpretations, if necessary, using brackets.

Important Factors in Shaping Teachers' Feedback Decisions and Practices

Effect of Students' Expectations on Teachers' Feedback Decisions and Practices

Our teachers ($N = 14$) unanimously identified their students' expectations and preferences as a factor which shaped their feedback-related decisions and practices. The teachers also described these preferences as highly grammar- and accuracy-centered, rather than content and organization. In Excerpt 1, Mahya reported that her students preferred grammar-centered feedback over feedback on content and organization:

> **Excerpt 1**: "I think my students' expectations play an important role in how I give feedback… Students feel good when they do not have any grammatical errors. When students do not have grammatical errors, and I give them content-related feedback, they might get offended. They may ask why I gave them any feedback if their grammar is accurate." (Mahya, interview transcript, p. 71)

Mahya's students probably thought that feedback was synonymous with grammar correction, that feedback should always include grammar-related comments, and that feedback on other aspects of writing was unnecessary and even offensive. In Excerpt 2, Amir delved into the possible roots of these grammar-centered student expectations:

> **Excerpt 2**: "My students think that it is the teacher's job to only correct grammatical errors. Many students may think that language is mainly about grammar. High school [English education] has affected students' mindset, so they think if they learn grammar, their language learning would be complete… So, I end up giving more grammar feedback than what I like." (Amir, interview transcript, pp. 7-8)

As shown above, not only did Amir notice his students' emphasis on grammatical accuracy and grammar feedback, but he also touched upon the relationship between students' high school English learning experiences and their CF-related preferences. Quite interestingly, he noted that students' expectations influenced his feedback decisions and practices, and that students' experiences in receiving feedback may have led them to believe that grammar feedback is more important than feedback on content and organization, thus forming a vicious cycle.

We found out that two teachers made an exception regarding their students' grammar-centered feedback preferences and stated that younger learners generally attached less importance to grammar. Specifically, Niloo mentioned age as an important factor in shaping students' CF-

related perceptions. She stated that, in the Iranian society, grammatical errors may lead to negative perceptions about one's English proficiency, and that the fear of such presuppositions can influence older students, leading them to value grammatical accuracy in L2 writing. These findings indicate that student preferences affected our teachers' feedback decisions and practices, that these students valued grammar feedback, and that these student expectations were sometimes shaped by school background and age. The teachers shared similar beliefs about the effects of students' preferences on their feedback decisions and practices, which attests to the importance and ubiquity of these preferences.

Sources of Students' Grammar-centered Feedback Preferences

As we reported above, all our teachers ($N = 14$) claimed that their students' feedback preferences were grammar-centered, and that these students were less interested in feedback on content and/or organization. We identified the following sources for these grammar-centered preferences:

- Grammar-centered English education in the Iranian school system ($N = 14$)
- Sociocultural value of grammatical accuracy in writing ($n = 12$)
- Need for grammatical accuracy in tests of English proficiency ($n = 4$)
- Need for grammatical accuracy in school, pre-university, and university assessment ($n = 4$)

As shown above, the teachers unanimously believed that their students' expectations were grammar-centered, and such expectations were deeply rooted in students' school backgrounds. In Excerpt 3, Esi discussed how students' expectations shaped teachers' feedback practices by mentioning several social, political, and educational factors:

> **Excerpt 3**: "What students learn [at school] is very much grammar, so they think they only need to learn grammar in English institutes… The combination of the Iranian school system and students' grammar-centered expectations makes our [English] education system the way it is… And it is deeply rooted… in Iranian people' culture… Teachers teach grammar because it is objective, so teachers' authority will not be questioned… Grammar feedback makes everything objective, and teachers' authority will be safe." (Esi, interview transcript, pp. 11-12)

Excerpt 3 includes two important points. First, Esi believed that the language teaching climate in Iran is influenced by the Iranian school system. Second, it is quite interesting to see how he viewed grammar correction as part of teachers' defense mechanism to protect their sense of authority in the unique Iranian sociocultural context. Other teachers, such as Ramtin, agreed with Esi and brought up the importance English education in the Iranian school system and high sociocultural value of grammatical accuracy.

Some teachers also stated that their students valued grammar-centered feedback because of the perceived assessment criteria in English proficiency tests (e.g., the TOEFL iBT) ($n = 4$) and

school, pre-university, and university assessment (*n* = 4). For instance, Mamad explained how his students' educational backgrounds, tests of English proficiency, and the Iranian national university entrance exam, Konkoor, contributed to grammar-oriented expectations in writing:

> **Excerpt 4**: "In Konkoor, students get tested on [English] grammar, so they think grammar is the most important thing in English classes; now, they come to English classes with those expectations… English proficiency tests are also directing student expectations toward [grammatical] accuracy… Many of my students think that they can get high scores with just good grammar… [At school] they were told to write whatever they want, as long as it was error-free." (Mamad, interview transcript, pp. 29-30)

These findings suggest that students' grammar-centered feedback preferences may be deeply rooted in their previous education and assessment experiences. The teachers also noted that students tended to transfer these preferences to the English learning contexts in institutes.

Effects of Teachers' Perceptions and Values on Their Feedback Decisions and Practices

The second important factor which influenced our teachers' feedback decisions and practices was their own perceptions, beliefs, and values (*N* = 14). Drawing a contrastive picture, the teachers valued feedback on content and organization more than their students did, and they placed less emphasis on grammar feedback than their students did. Some teachers delved more deeply into the sources of these perceptions and values. Ramtin, for instance, elaborated on what feedback should address, on the importance of his own perceptions and values in shaping his feedback decisions and practices, and on how these perceptions were different from his students' preferences:

> **Excerpt 5**: "My own perceptions about L2 writing, language learning, and feedback are very important. I think lots of my feedback is motivated by what I believe writing and feedback are about… My beliefs stem from my academic background and education. Also, my years of teaching experience." (Ramtin, interview transcript, p. 74)

Overall, our teachers unanimously reported that their perceptions, values, and beliefs were important determinants of their decisions and practices, and that effective feedback should cover a range of areas. At the same time, they showed that they were keenly aware of the discrepancies between their own and their students' feedback-related beliefs.

Differences between Teachers' Perceptions and Students' Preferences regarding Feedback

We explored the differences between the teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and values and those held by their students' preferences to see whether they were (mis)aligned. We identified the following discrepancies:

- Teachers' stronger focus on content and organization feedback (*n* = 12)

- Teachers' less emphasis on grammar feedback ($n = 12$)
- Teachers' higher value placed on peer feedback ($n = 1$)

In Excerpt 6, Payman stated that he mostly provided grammar feedback on student writing, a decision aligned with his students' expectations, while he also commented on content/organization feedback, aligned with his own values:

> **Excerpt 6**: "I think the fact that we first correct grammatical errors is fine, but other areas like content and organization [are important], too… My own beliefs are different from what my students want. Ideally, I would provide much more feedback on things like content, but students value grammar feedback." (Payman, interview transcript, p. 65)

These findings suggest that our teachers valued feedback on content and organization, along with grammar, whereas their students tended to only seek grammar-centered feedback.

Effects of Institutional Guidelines on Teachers' Feedback Decisions and Practices

The third factor which influenced a few of our teachers' feedback decisions and practices was institutional guidelines, although most teachers ($n = 11$) did not consider these institutional guidelines important.

- English institutes *not* providing feedback-related guidelines ($n = 11$)
  - Business-oriented attitudes to achieve high student satisfaction→ providing any form of feedback that students prefer ($n = 10$)
  - Lack of feedback-related knowledge among English institute directors ($n = 1$)

Many teachers believed that their hiring English institutes prioritized financial gains over teachers' feedback-related values, thereby not recommending any type of feedback to teachers as long as students were satisfied. In Excerpt 7, Amir delved into why these institutes did not provide any feedback-related guidelines to him:

> **Excerpt 7**: "I have not seen an institute tell teachers how to give feedback. English institutes only want to make money. They do whatever the clientele [students] want. They only do the things that keep students happy." (Amir, interview transcript, p. 8)

Here, Amir criticized the business-oriented culture in language institutes because these attitudes caused teachers to yield to students' grammar-centered expectations. Also, Amir referred to students as "clientele," thus pointing to what he saw as these institutes' business-oriented attitudes in shaping any guidelines related to feedback. As a result, many teachers noted that they ended up providing more grammar feedback, something that was contrary to their own values. These findings depicted a situation in which English institutes did not provide specific feedback-related guidelines to their teachers, so any feedback-related guidelines, or lack thereof, were solely driven by students' feedback-related preferences.

However, a few teachers (*n* = 3) believed that English institutes *did* play a role in shaping their feedback decisions and practices:

- English institutes *providing* feedback-related guidelines (*n* = 3)
    - Business-oriented attitudes to achieve high rates of student satisfaction→ providing grammar feedback (*n* = 1)
    - Consideration of students' affective state by not providing comprehensive feedback (*n* = 1)
    - Emphasis on preparing students for standardized tests→ providing grammar feedback (*n* = 1)

For instance, in Excerpt 8, Mahya explained why her employing English institute demanded her to provide comprehensive grammar feedback, and why this demand was driven by the business-oriented attitude of keeping students satisfied:

> **Excerpt 8**: "My institute expects me to cover all grammar points and to give students grammar feedback on every error. Keeping students satisfied is the reason here. We sometimes talk to the director about the ineffectiveness of excessive grammar feedback, but they say they know what students want." (Mahya, interview transcript, p. 24)

Excerpt 8 revealed how English institutes might prioritize students' perceived needs (e.g., grammar feedback) over teachers' perceptions and values. This excerpt also provided further insights both into the business-oriented conduct of these institutes and the compromises teachers needed to make in providing feedback to keep students satisfied.

Effects of Parents' Expectations on Teachers' Feedback Decisions and Practices

A few teachers (*n* = 2) pointed to the role of their young students' parents in shaping teachers' feedback decisions and practices. Specifically, Mona shared a memory in which a parent was "complaining" because of Mona's comprehensive grammar feedback. See Excerpt 9:

> **Excerpt 9**: "Once, a parent showed me their kid's essay with many red marks. They told me that the kid felt discouraged after seeing all those corrections… So, I toned down my grammar feedback to keep the student motivated." (Mona, interview transcript, p. 34)

Another teacher, Niloo, reported how one parent preferred extensive grammar feedback, and how this preference shaped Niloo's feedback decisions and practices when dealing with that student. See Excerpt 10:

> **Excerpt 10**: "I got a parent who had looked at their kid's essay and found some uncorrected errors… I sometimes do not correct every mistake in young students' writing to keep them motivated… After that, I tried to give more feedback on that student's grammatical errors to keep their parent happy." (Niloo, interview transcript, p. 44)

Despite these two exceptions, most teachers (*n* = 12) dismissed parents' expectations because parents did not hold feedback-related knowledge.

Relative Importance of these Factors in Shaping Teachers' Feedback Decisions and Practices

In this study, we aimed to provide a thorough picture of the factors that shaped our teacher participants' feedback decisions and practices. Our data analysis revealed the following findings regarding the relative importance of the factors in the Findings section:

- Considering only students' preferences (*n* = 1)
- Considering students' preferences, teachers' perceptions and values, and, if any, institutional guidelines (*n* = 12)
    - Higher importance of students' preferences (*n* = 10)
        - Institutional guidelines catering to students' preferences (*n* = 2)
    - Higher importance of teachers' perceptions and values (*n* = 2)
- Considering only teachers' perceptions and values (*n* = 1)

As our analysis showed, only one teacher (*n* = 1) claimed that students' expectations were the only factor which shaped her feedback decisions and practices. Driven by financial and job security concerns, Fatima reported that her feedback decisions and practices were completely shaped by her students' grammar-centered preferences.

Most of the teachers (*n* = 12) considered students' preferences (sometimes filtered through institutional guidelines) and their own perceptions when providing feedback. 10 of these 12 teachers, however, prioritized student preferences over their own perceptions and values. The reasons they mentioned were higher student satisfaction rates and financial gains. Unlike these 10 teachers, two participants (*n* = 2) prioritized their own perceptions, beliefs, and values, over their students' expectations, although both factors were reportedly considered. For instance, Amir stressed the importance of feedback on content development, although he mentioned that grammar feedback was still a component of his practices because his students valued grammatical accuracy. See Excerpt 11:

> **Excerpt 11**: "My feedback priority is my own values and beliefs, but I consider what students want… I try not to follow the [student] expectations that are incorrect… For example, I tell my students to support their opinions. I also challenge them about their ideas… But since my students like grammar feedback, I give them enough grammar comments to keep them happy and motivated." (Amir, interview transcript, p. 8)

Here, Amir valued content development in writing and reported that his feedback practices were primarily based on his own perceptions and beliefs, although he also considered what his students' grammar-centered preferences.

Finally, Mona was the one teacher (*n* = 1) who completely dismissed her students' feedback-related expectations, thereby only following her own feedback-related values, because her students were not reportedly aware of their needs in writing.

As we reported above, except for one teacher whose feedback practices were completely formed by her students' expectations, the other 13 teachers reported using their own perceptions, along with students' expectations, when providing feedback: 12 considering both and one considering only his own perceptions and values. We also explored the reasons behind the teachers' reliance, at least partially, on their own feedback-related perceptions and values:

- Teachers' better understanding of students' needs in writing (*n* = 13)
    - Teachers' formal knowledge of L2 teaching/learning (*n* = 5)

Many teachers (e.g., Mona and Mahya) stressed the importance of their academic background and professional experience when discussing why they placed a higher value on content and organization, not just grammar, when providing feedback. For instance, in Excerpt 12, Mahya clarified that her academic background in literature, philosophy, and history led her to emphasize content development in student writing:

> **Excerpt 12**: "… My background involves literature, philosophy, and history. These subjects were very effective in shaping my mindset about education… When you see different, evolving opinions, you are no longer dogmatic. In writing, I tell students that they will be assessed not based on grammatical accuracy but based on presenting and supporting their ideas. (Mahya, interview transcript, p. 25)

Among the 12 teachers who considered both their students' preferences and their own perceptions when providing feedback, 10 placed more importance on their students' preferences. We identified the following reasons for this finding:

- Achieving higher rates of student satisfaction (*n* = 10)
    - Considering higher financial gains (*n* = 10)
- Fulfilling assigned teaching curricula (*n* = 2)
- Achieving higher rates of parent satisfaction (*n* = 2)

In Excerpt 13, Parima showed her appreciation for content feedback, but she also considered her students' expectations, sometimes only providing grammar feedback. She brought up financial reasons for this discrepancy between her own values and her decisions and practices:

> **Excerpt 13**: "Students do not care about content feedback. So, I sometimes do not give content feedback at all. Although I think good writing should have good content, sometimes I only give grammar feedback… Teaching English in Iran is like a business. You need to keep students happy." (Parima, interview transcript, pp. 56-57)

In Excerpt 14, Mahya added a new angle and stressed the need to fulfill assigned teaching curricula. She noted that grammar feedback was strongly prescribed in her hiring institute, that

these guidelines were shaped by students' preferences, and that she followed these guidelines and student preferences for financial reasons:

> **Excerpt 14**: "Since the English institute I work for is dogmatic in feedback, I have to go with the flow… These guidelines are created based on students' preferences for grammatical accuracy… Teaching is my career, so I need to compromise when it comes to things like feedback… I have to listen to your students and their needs." (Mahya, interview transcript, pp. 25-26)

Our findings suggest that the participants valued and advocated feedback on various areas, although they still prioritized their students' grammar-centered preferences. These findings lead us to believe that, in the Iranian English institutes, students' preferences are probably the most important factor in shaping teachers' feedback decision and practices.

Discussion

In the current study, we aimed to answer two research questions: 1) which factors shaped Iranian EFL teachers' feedback decisions and practices, and 2) what the relative importance of these factors was. The first factor we identified was students' preferences and how they affected teachers' feedback decisions and practices. The studies on learner perceptions about feedback have yielded inconclusive results. On the one hand, Kaivanpanah, Alavi, and Sepehrinia (2015) suggest that their Iranian students valued grammatical accuracy and teacher-generated feedback. Part of the reason why Iranian students favor grammar correction, rather than comments on content and organization, may be because of the concreteness of grammatical errors and corrections, as noted by Leki (1991) and several teachers in our study (e.g., Esi). On the other hand, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1996) state that their English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students equally valued feedback on content, organization, and grammar. Our findings seem to support the findings by Kaivanpanah, Alavi, and Sepehrinia (2015), Leki (1991), and Schulz (2001), leading to some concrete understanding of how our teachers understood their students' preferences. Specifically, our teachers both believed that their students valued grammar feedback more highly than feedback on content/organization and identified their students' preferences as an important factor in shaping their feedback practices. The findings also show that student preferences may be deeply rooted in their 1) socio-educational backgrounds, and 2) perceived usefulness of grammatical accuracy in various teaching, learning, and assessment contexts.

Our second finding showed the importance of the teachers' own perceptions, beliefs, and values about feedback and how they provided a basis for decision-making and action. These findings can be compared with those of Baleghizadeh and Farshchi's (2009) who reported that most of their Iranian teachers perceived grammar correction as one of the most important parts of teaching and assessing writing. However, our findings point to a more complex picture. Although our teachers valued feedback on content and organization and showed willingness to offer such

feedback, they were equally aware of the constraints of their students' preferences for grammar-centered feedback. Therefore, they often offered grammar-centered feedback, sometimes against their better judgements. This finding is comparable with Gurzynski-Weiss' (2016) who suggests that teachers' own perceptions and beliefs about their students' expectations may shape teachers' in-class feedback decisions and practices. In our case, however, it is more the perceptions of students' preferences, rather than the perceptions about what good practice should be, that seems to have shaped our teachers' feedback practices.

The third factor which shaped a few teachers' feedback decisions and practices was institutional guidelines. However, the teachers did not think their hiring English institutes provided specific feedback-related guidelines to them, thus at least not affecting these teachers' practices in a theoretically informed manner. Rather, these institutes were seemingly concerned about financial gains. Although some studies suggest that institutional guidelines might mediate the translation of teachers' perceptions and values into practices (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012; Lee, 2009), our findings indicate that students' preferences can be more important than institutional guidelines due to the business-oriented attitudes at English institutes in Iran. In addition, this finding is quite interesting when compared with that of Lee's (2008) because Lee noticed that institutional guidelines played an important role in determining teachers' feedback practices in Hong Kong. We, by contrast, showed that the English institutes in Iran where our participants worked may prioritize student satisfaction without regard for teachers' own perceptions and values. These discrepancies are probably caused by the contextual differences between Iran and Hong Kong or between the types of institutions where teachers work.

The recent literature on CF (e.g., Lee, Vahabi, & Bikowski, 2018; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019) reveals that teachers' feedback practices may be misaligned with both their own perceptions and what Ferris (2014) calls best practices. The literature also identifies several factors which shape teachers' feedback decisions and practices: Teachers' own perceptions and values (e.g., Ferris, 2014; Gurzynski-Weiss, 2016), institutional guidelines (e.g., Lee 2008), overwhelming number of students' grammatical errors (Lee, 2009), and pressure from English examinations (Lee, 2009). Although the effect of students' preferences on teachers' feedback decisions and practices has been mentioned in a few studies (e.g., Montgomery & Baker, 2007), our findings point to the importance of these expectations in several Iranian EFL contexts, and to the impact of these expectations on shaping teachers' feedback decisions and practices in such contexts. As our findings show, students' feedback-related preferences may often override teachers' own feedback-related perceptions and beliefs, especially when "keeping students happy" seems to be an important factor for both teachers and English institutes.

Our analysis did not indicate that our teachers' individual differences caused any systematic discrepancies in their feedback-related perceptions, values, decisions, and practices. We acknowledge that teachers' individual differences (e.g., academic coursework) have been shown to shape their feedback practices (e.g., Mackey, Polio, & McDonough, 2004; Gurzynski-Weiss, 2016), but the relative unanimity of our teachers' reported perceptions, values, decisions, and practices attests to the importance of students' expectations and preferences, rather than

teachers' own values, in shaping teachers' feedback decisions and practices in the Iranian EFL contexts we studied.

Conclusion

Lee (2019) argues for the incorporation of selective CF in the L2 classroom, but is what she calls "less is more?" feasible in an Iranian EFL context? Lee (2008) also adds that we still do not clearly know whether teachers provide feedback on student writing in accordance with institutional guidelines, their students' preferences, or teachers' own values, especially when the above factors are misaligned. Hoping to shed further light on the factors that help shape Iranian EFL teachers' feedback decisions and practices, we showed that teacher perceptions may provide an important foundation for practice, although they are not the dominant factors behind teachers' feedback decisions and practices. Rather, students' preferences seem to be the main driving-force behind these teachers' feedback practices in these contexts. Our findings also attest to the context-specific nature of research on feedback. That is, some existing research (e.g., Ferris, 2014) suggests that teachers' feedback perceptions and practices are not always aligned, but the reasons behind such discrepancies have received considerably less attention. For instance, previous research (e.g., Hyland & Hyland; 2006; Lee, 2013) underscores the importance of institutional guidelines in shaping teachers' feedback practices, but our findings suggest that these guidelines may not be important in the contexts we examined.

The current study should be regarded as exploratory. Because of the small sample size, our findings are descriptive in nature, so we do not wish to generalize them. Nonetheless, we think several pedagogical recommendations may be useful in the English institutes we studied and any other contexts which are socioculturally similar to Iran. First, we think English institutes should take the lead when it comes to CF. These institutes, for instance, should take a more research-informed approach to providing feedback guidelines to their teachers. This means that teachers may not need to succumb to their students' misinformed preferences about feedback, in our case over-emphasis on grammar feedback. Second, our findings suggest that many of teachers are familiar with the existing literature about feedback and practical implications. We think that these teachers can take a more active role in changing their students' grammar-centered feedback preferences. This change, however, needs to be spearheaded by English institutes, which, in our study, often placed a higher value on financial gains than providing sound feedback-related guidelines to their teachers. Overall, our findings point to a vicious circle in which teachers cannot follow their well-informed feedback perceptions and beliefs in the Iranian EFL contexts we studied. We think that, to break this circle, English institutes can (and should) allow for more feedback-related freedom to their teachers, who can in turn begin changing their students' (mis)perceptions about feedback.

We hope to have provided a more comprehensive picture of teachers' feedback practices by exploring the relative importance of several factors, thereby showing why, how, and when teachers' practices diverge from their feedback-related perceptions. We also hope that our findings

have shed more light on the complicated nature of feedback in the under-researched context of Iran. We realize that the study can be extended in several ways. First, along with the exploration of teachers' perceptions and self-reported practices, examining samples of student writing with teachers' feedback on it can help describe any cases of perception-practice convergence/divergence. Additionally, stimulated recalls facilitate the exploration of teachers' thoughts in cases of perception-practice discrepancies. Finally, because our participants brought up their students' proficiency levels as a factor that may affect their feedback practices, it is interesting to analyze student writing in various proficiency levels to see how teachers' feedback-related perceptions materialize in those writing samples.

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Appendix

1. Personal information: Age; educational background; TEFL/Linguistics-related coursework.
2. Teaching experience: Length; classes; proficiencies.
3. Who do you think is involved in shaping your feedback decisions and practices? What are the perceptions, expectations, preferences, and thoughts of these parties in your feedback practices? *Note*: Questions 4-9 were follow-up questions.
4. Do your students have certain expectations about feedback? What are your students' expectations about grammar correction? Please discuss.
5. Do *you* have certain perceptions about feedback? What are your perceptions about grammar correction? Please discuss.
6. Do English institutions have certain guidelines about feedback? Please discuss.
7. Do your young students' parents have certain expectations about feedback? What are their expectations about the role of grammar correction? Please discuss.
8. Think about the above factors; which one do you think is the most important one in shaping your feedback practices? Please discuss.

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