Written Corrective Feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2: Teachers' Priorities, Practices, and Beliefs

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Abstract

Teacher corrective feedback is widely recognised as integral in supporting developing L2 writers. The potentially high pressure IELTS test preparation classroom presents a context where feedback has not yet been extensively studied. Consequently, teachers' approaches to corrective feedback on Writing Task 2, the essay component of IELTS Writing, are not well understood. In this exploratory case study, the feedback practices and beliefs of seven teachers at a private language institution in the United Arab Emirates were investigated to uncover how Task 2 feedback is undertaken. A mixed-methods design was adopted to investigate three aspects of teacher response to 104 Writing Task 2 practice compositions: (1) the textual features that teachers focused on; (2) error treatment and commentary techniques; (3) the perceptions and motivations underlying the practices identified. It was revealed that most corrective feedback was grammar-focused, while teachers' comments tended to relate to a learner's response to the task, as well as grammar. Feedback techniques varied noticeably in nature and scope, with a preference for 'appropriating' techniques such as direct correction of errors and prescriptive comments. It was concluded that teachers adopted idiosyncratic techniques and methods based on their experience, personal beliefs, and theories about feedback.

Keywords: Written Corrective Feedback, IELTS, Writing Task 2, Second Language Writing

Introduction

Increases in international migration to English-speaking countries for work and academic purposes has led to a growing need for success in international English language tests (Green, 2007; Moore & Morton, 2005). One such test, International English Language Testing System (IELTS), has witnessed an uninterrupted and continuous rise in the number of test-takers around the world for a number of years. The annual number of global test-takers stood at 3 million in 2016 (IELTS, 2017). IELTS is an international high-stakes, gate-keeping test that provides reliable evidence of a person's English proficiency (Green, 2006). Co-owned by

the British Council, Cambridge English, and IDP, IELTS is widely established as a selection tool to screen individuals based on language proficiency (Hayes & Read, 2008). It is utilised internationally by a purported 10,000 organisations (IELTS, 2017), including universities, employers, and some governments (Green, 2007). Success in IELTS is increasingly becoming a key factor for individuals to secure their work or study-related ambitions in English-speaking countries. Consequently, a worldwide industry for IELTS classroom-based preparation has blossomed (Green, 2007). Candidates enrolled on an IELTS preparation course can expect to undertake practice tasks within Writing Task 2, the discursive essay component of the test. They can also anticipate written corrective feedback from the teacher on such tasks, which is the focus of the present study.

The literature on teacher response to writing in IELTS and other well-established writing test contexts (TOEFL iBT, TOEIC, China's College English Test, etc.) has not yet been undertaken. Studies have scratched the surface of how writing is taught in the IELTS preparation classroom. Written tasks that are modelled on the test, along with practice that simulates the test's conditions are widely-established (Green, 2007; Hayes & Read, 2008). Nevertheless, how teachers respond to such tasks, particularly to learners' 250-word Writing Task 2 practice compositions, has not been the subject of research, and is consequently poorly-understood. What features of learner compositions do teachers focus on in feedback? How do they convey their written feedback? Do they transfer feedback techniques from general EFL writing to IELTS, or approach feedback with techniques unique to the context of the task? Do teachers utilise the Task 2 assessment criteria at all? The aim of this exploratory mixed-methods study is to shed light on the nature of Writing Task 2 teacher feedback, by examining what teachers do as Writing Task 2 feedback providers in a private language learning centre. It also seeks to explore the perceptions and beliefs of teachers in Writing Task 2 feedback, in order that the rationales behind specific practices can be better understood.

Review of the Literature

The IELTS Test

IELTS provides a measurement of the English proficiency of an individual through a single test administered regardless of existing ability. The purpose of the test is usually to predict a test-taker's readiness for study or residence in an English speaking country (Coleman, Starfield, & Hagan, 2003). The test consists of four modules, one for each of the four macro skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Performance is measured in bands (and half bands) from 1-9, with 9 representing proficiency. IELTS represents a hurdle for many test-takers (see Coleman et al., 2003), potentially delaying or obstructing their future personal, educational, or emigrational goals (Green, 2006). This is particularly evident for candidates whose level of English does not meet the band score required (usually 6 to 7 for academic study in a higher education institution in an English-speaking country (Green, 2007)). For prospective test-takers in this position, one band increases in performance are possible through face-to-face coaching, though not without significant inputs of time (Brown, 1998) and effort. Finally, with minimum band score stipulations often required in all four macro

skills (rather than a simple average), underperformance in one of the skills can be enough to 'write off' that particular test for the candidate.

Overview of IELTS Writing Task 2

In IELTS, writing is assessed through two tasks, the overall band score being more heavily weighted towards Writing Task 2. Task 2 assesses a candidate's ability to write a discursive composition in response to an open-ended prompt, using appropriate content, style, register, and organisation (Moore & Morton, 2005). Writing Task 2 is likely a source of difficulty for many candidates undertaking IELTS. It is widely accepted that writing is a "complex and difficult skill to learn" (Uysal, 2009, p. 314). While perhaps less of a high-pressure situation than the one-on-one spoken encounter with the examiner (Issitt, 2008), undertaking the IELTS Writing test is still likely due to induce tension in candidates. This is owing to the limited time allowed to complete two distinct tasks, the prohibition of reference materials, the unpredictability of the task topics, and other potential idiosyncratic affective factors. Concurrently, when writing is formally assessed, the nuances of the task requirements and assessment criteria take on an elevated level of importance. For Writing Task 2, this includes a set of distinct rubrics, established approaches to the task (available in course books for candidates-in-preparation), and the detailed assessment criteria. Learner familiarity with these factors could influence how they interact with the task (O'Loughlin & Wigglesworth, 2003), and ultimately impact on their performance.

How IELTS Writing Task 2 is assessed

Writing Task 2 is assessed by trained and certified examiners using confidential band descriptors (though simplified, public ones are available online). Candidates' compositions are evaluated by one examiner using four equally-weighted criteria, which are summarised in

Table 1
Overview of IELTS Writing Task 2 assessment criteria

Task Response	Coherence and Cohesion	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy
How the prompt is addressed Relevance of the position presented Support and extension of main ideas Clarity and justification of conclusions drawn	Arrangement and organisation of ideas Paragraphing Referencing and substitution Use of cohesive devices	Range of lexis Use of uncommon lexical items Accuracy of lexis Spelling and word formation	Range of grammatical structures Accuracy of grammar Use of complex structures Correct punctuation

Adapted from the public IELTS Writing Task 2 band descriptors

Writing Task 2 is assessed by trained and certified examiners using confidential band descriptors (though simplified, public ones are available online). Candidates' compositions

are evaluated by one examiner using four equally-weighted criteria, which are summarised in Table 1.

Only the overall band score result for writing (incorporating Task 1) is transmitted to candidates. No constructive feedback is supplied, which would be of use particularly to individuals who need to re-take the test. Published course books and online resources orientating candidates to IELTS Writing Task 2 incorporate some of the textual features above. Such resources tend to focus on the requirements of the task (Task Response), and features of Coherence and Cohesion. Course materials often provide little to no input on grammar and lexis, perhaps owing to the wide variations in task prompt topics, and lack of pages available to devote to grammar and vocabulary practice exercises.

Preparation for IELTS Writing Task 2

While it is typical for candidates to take IELTS relying solely on their own independent preparation, some opt to undertake a teacher-led, paid-for preparation course. Test preparation can be defined generally as "any intervention procedure specifically undertaken to improve test scores, whether by improving the skills measured by the test or by improving the skills for taking the test, or both" (Messick, 1982, cited in Liu, 2014, p. 1). Candidates enrol in IELTS preparation courses for various reasons. These include perceptions of the test as a barrier to important life decisions, its relatively high cost to undertake (USD 215 in the United States, GBP 150 in the UK, EUR 223 in Germany, JPY 25,380 in Japan), and the perceived level of difficulty (particularly in achieving higher bands). Owing to these factors and the test's rapid growth, IELTS preparation courses provided at private language teaching institutions have flourished (Green, 2007). Some evidence exists indicating that these courses are popular with pre-test candidates (Hayes & Read, 2008). The current body of literature suggests classroom-based IELTS preparation can result in enhanced performance in the Writing test (Brown, 1998; Green, 2007), though the time investment is significant and could pose problems for individuals in full-time employment.

IELTS Writing Training as Preparation for Writing Tests

IELTS Writing Task 2 preparation can be viewed as writing training for test purposes, a distinct sub-field of second language writing teaching and learning. Consequently, the pedagogical approach differs from other forms of writing instruction, notably creative composition and process approaches. Anastasi (1981) developed a typology of activities to help learners in training for assessment purposes. These involve:

1) Orientation towards tasks, including awareness raising of tasks and addressing learner anxieties
2) Intensive, short-term practice tasks that mirror actual test items
3) Training in relevant cognitive skills, applicable for the test

In contrast, process approaches to writing development are generative, emphasising a cycle of drafting, reformulation, and editing (Dheram, 1995). There are multiple opportunities for learners to incorporate teacher feedback (Saliu-Abdulahi, Hellekjaer, & Hertzberg, 2017).

Writing for test preparation purposes is more likely to invoke an intentional and/or positive washback among students (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2008; Luxia, 2007). The IELTS preparation classroom may be characterised by teachers and learners who "have a positive attitude toward the examination or test, and work willingly and collaboratively toward its objectives" (Cheng et al., 2008, p. 10).

The context also has implications in terms of the writer considering his or her audience. In a test preparation context such as IELTS, the writer is aiming to satisfy and impress the reader within the confines of the rubric and mark scheme. Indeed, this is a priority for learners. Thus, the relationship between the teacher and learners is likely to be asymmetrical in the conditions of writing training for test purposes. Teacher feedback is also likely to differ. Acting as an expert guide, the instructor of writing for test purposes uses written feedback to afford learners a direct measurement of the quality of their practice tasks in relation to task expectations. With knowledge of the test requirements and the assessment criteria, she can show learners which aspects of the task they are underperforming in (Zellermayer, 1989). She can supply personalised instruction to help identify performance gaps in extant compositions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Finally, the teacher can help candidates better understand the expectations of the Writing Task 2 rubrics, format and expectations, with the task a distinct textual product in its own right.

How Teachers Prepare L2 Learners for Writing Tests

Limited research has been carried out investigating what teachers generally do in courses preparing learners for writing tests. Writing within a TOEFL context, Hamp-Lyons (1998) suggests that teachers of writing for test preparation purposes may "see their principal task as helping learners increase their knowledge of and ability to use English, think about what is appropriate in test preparation, and consciously choose appropriate content and methods" (p. 330). She goes on to state that selecting classroom content for test-takers is likely to pose challenges, particularly for novice teachers. Among the few exploratory studies carried out in an IELTS preparation context, Weir and Green (2002, cited in Green, 2007) developed their own theoretical construct of the test to make predictions about classroom content in preparation courses, which they verified through observation. Course content that was "closely modelled on test design" was one of three preparation approaches uncovered (p. 79). Similarly, Hayes and Read (2008), using a case study observation approach, discovered teachers in one particular institution focused on "actual test tasks", ignoring "skills not directly assessed in the test" (p. 109). Yet, observation in another institution uncovered practices that leant towards EAP development more generally. The picture is far from complete, and there is a notable lack of studies into the specific approaches, techniques, and practices teachers utilise when preparing candidates for IELTS, including but not limited to corrective feedback on writing tasks.

Issues in the Literature on Corrective Feedback on Second Language Writing

The literature on written corrective feedback on second language writing is extensive, yet permeated with a lack of clear conclusions for classroom practitioners (Bitchener, 2008; Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010; Ferris, 2004). Studies have tended to centre on the

contested issue of the effectiveness of corrective feedback (Bitchener, 2008; van Beuningen, 2010; van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2012). This reflects the desire for feedback to be as beneficial as possible for learners. At the same time, the heavy workloads involved in corrective feedback are widely acknowledged (Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Junqueira & Payant, 2015). A lack of consistency in research designs, disabling comparisons between findings, is particularly problematic (Bitchener, 2008; Evans et al., 2010; Ferris, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Waller & Papi, 2017). Gaps in research are also prevalent, with few studies investigating feedback on writing in test preparation settings, or featuring teachers practising in a private language institution. Consequently, the corrective feedback studies reviewed below are located within general EFL/ESL writing, usually in a higher education context.

The present study is concerned with two sub-genres of research within the body of literature on written corrective feedback. These are what Ferris (2012) terms "text-analytic descriptions of student errors and teacher feedback" and "studies of teacher views on written corrective feedback" (p. 446). The former originated in the 1980s when the field was in its infancy. Such studies feature analyses of samples of teacher feedback, answering questions such as "what is going on?", "what are teachers focusing on?", and "how are they conveying their feedback?" (Ferris, 2012). Yet, few studies in this tradition take a value-free, descriptive approach, as will be detailed in the following section. The latter body comprises studies that involve researchers seeking to explore written feedback by querying teachers directly for their perceptions and views of (usually their) feedback (Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). These investigations have attempted to uncover the motivations and beliefs that underlie why teachers respond to learner texts in the specific ways that they do. This is still a nascent area of investigation, with relatively few comprehensive studies addressing how teachers perceive written feedback. No research relating to the feedback beliefs and values held by teachers preparing candidates to undertake IELTS or any other formal writing test could be uncovered for this literature review.

What Teachers Focus on in Corrective Feedback on Learner Compositions

A recurring finding in written corrective feedback is that teachers are generally preoccupied with mechanical, lower-order textual concerns in feedback. These are, specifically, the identification and correction of surface-level errors of grammar, syntax and lexis (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Sommers, 1982; Truscott, 1996, 1999; Zamel, 1985). Errors in second language writing can be defined as when the learning writer deviates from the norms, rules and expectations of the target language (Ferris, 2011). Montgomery and Baker (2007) looked at the quantity and type of teacher feedback given by 13 school teachers on around 100 texts. The authors found that teachers had a tendency to give substantial amounts of feedback on local issues (defined as spelling, grammar, and punctuation), but relatively little on global text issues (content, organisation, and discourse). Similarly, Lee's (2008) study featuring 26 secondary level teachers in Hong Kong revealed 94.1% of teachers' feedback items were form-focused (grammar and vocabulary), 3.8% content related, and just 0.4% on organisation (the remaining 1.7% on other aspects). This was in spite of established guidelines stating, "teachers must avoid providing detailed editing

comments on the surface form without paying attention to organizational and content issues" (p. 72).

How Teachers Provide Written Feedback in the Context of L2 Writing

An issue in the literature on written corrective feedback is the method a teacher can or should use when treating learners' errors. In error treatment in second language writing, teachers can respond either directly or indirectly (Ferris, 2011). The former denotes the direct correction of the error by the teacher. The latter features the use of strategies for learner self-correction through cognitive linguistic discovery (Ferris, 2011), sometimes using through the use of metalinguistic information (Ellis, 2009; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). These are commonly termed error codes. Four distinct strategies can be surmised and are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Error treatment strategies in written feedback

Direct treatment	Indirect treatment			
	Location-only	Type-only	Location and type	Open-ended
The teacher corrects the learner's error herself.	The teacher signifies that something is an error by underlining or highlighting the individual word or chunk of text.	The teacher signifies in the margin that there is an error on a particular line, and includes a symbol indicating the type of error (e.g. 'P' for punctuation).	The teacher flags up errors by underlining the error and assigning a symbol, so the learner knows what type of error it is (e.g. 'WO' for word order).	The teacher notes down on the relevant line in the paper's margin how many errors have been made, but does not write what and where.

Adapted from Bitchener (2008) and Ferris (2011)

A number of studies support the value of indirect feedback, mostly for its higher cognitive engagement compared with direct error feedback (Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Park, Song, & Shin, 2016; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Nevertheless, caution should be exercised with the implementation of indirect feedback techniques, since the ambiguity or complexity of indirect approaches can frustrate some learners (Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

Comment writing on learner texts is well-known to be an integral, if time-consuming constituent of the feedback process. Commentary can be conceptualised as global in nature, often appearing at the end of a learner's composition. Yet, comments can also be highly specific, targeting a particular section of the text. Sommers (1982) advises teachers to be clear, concise, and explicit in written commentary, though this is not necessarily easy to achieve. Few would argue against the notion that elaborate, verbose commentary can be perceived as confusing or unhelpful, especially for low-level learners (Gulley, 2012; Robb et al., 1986). Ferris (2014) recommends teachers offer both encouragement and constructive criticism, and to phrase comments wherever possible as questions, rather than imperatives.

This is to reduce the potential for teacher textual appropriation. Yet, teachers are faced with the challenge of balancing clarity with maintaining a positive working relationship with the learner. Hyland and Hyland (2001) note that teachers are more likely to hedge negative feedback than they are praise. This can result in misunderstanding and confusion from some learners, particularly with regard to the constructive feedback they received. It would seem simplicity and explicitness in commentary may be a wise approach to follow for teachers when writing feedback comments.

Teacher Perceptions of Their Own Written Feedback

Of the studies that have been carried out on teacher perceptions of written feedback, two key themes have emerged. First, contextual factors influence teachers' corrective feedback practices. Lee's (2008) study of 26 secondary school teachers in Hong Kong found that teachers were influenced by issues of accountability, local exam-centred pressures, and (a lack of) teacher training in written feedback. Second, when surveyed directly, teachers expressly raised concerns about learners' language accuracy as an area of importance in corrective feedback. Nevertheless, teachers' perceptions of the written feedback they give may not automatically correlate with the actual feedback they provide. Lee (2003) undertook a study involving matching the reactions of secondary school teachers to a number of statements concerning error correction and compared these with the teachers' own approaches to error treatment. The results indicated that the teachers sometimes contradicted themselves, particularly with regard to beliefs and practices concerning how much error feedback to give, how explicit to be in feedback, and variety in error feedback. Montgomery and Baker (2007) uncovered a similar mismatch; in that instance between the amount of global and local feedback provided. Teachers tended not to focus on higher-order issues in the first draft(s) and lower-order ones in the final draft, despite expressing views to the contrary. This would imply that there appears to be little inherent benefit in surveying teachers' beliefs and perceptions of written feedback, without additional textual analysis of their feedback (or vice-versa).

Aims of the Present Study

The present study aims to investigate how teachers provide written feedback to learners who are writing compositions as part of classroom preparation to take IELTS Writing Task 2. The study sets out to answer three main research questions:

1. What textual features do teachers of IELTS preparation at a private language teaching centre in the UAE focus on when responding to candidates' Writing Task 2 practice compositions?

2. How do teachers at this institution provide written feedback on candidates' Task 2 practice compositions with regard to:

   A. How second language errors are treated (if at all).

   B. How and where commentary is provided on textual features.

3. What beliefs and perceptions underlie the nature of the feedback teachers provide on candidates' Task 2 practice compositions at this institution?

The following section will outline the methodology adopted to answer these research questions.

Method

Methodological Approach

A mixed-methods design was adopted to data collection in the present study. Concurrent triangulation was the approach to combining methods of data gathering selected, with both quantitative and qualitative data integrated at the analysis stage to address the research aims previously outlined (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Concerning quantitative data, textual analyses of teacher feedback demonstrated how teachers actually approached written corrective feedback. These are the preferred data collection instruments for descriptive accounts of teacher feedback, as verbal accounts alone may not always be reliable (Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Individual items of feedback were quantified to reveal priority areas (research question 1) and extant feedback techniques (research question 2). Regarding qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted towards the end of the data gathering period to investigate teachers' views, perceptions, and beliefs surrounding feedback in an IELTS Writing Task 2 context. The interviews provided complementary, though subjective evidence to answer research questions 1 and 2. Additionally, teachers' feedback rationales were revealed (research question 3). Data were triangulated at the analysis stage to illuminate instances where teacher feedback converged and diverged with stated practices. Institutional and ethical constraints (e.g., a lack of organisational feedback guidelines) prohibited the researcher from bringing in examples of teacher feedback for elaboration and explanation.

Context

The study took place at a private language teaching institution in the United Arab Emirates (the 'institution'). Teachers taught IELTS preparation to paying members of the public on either a two-week intensive course (adults), or seven-week extensive (adults) or twelve-week (teenagers, 15-17) extensive courses. Total IELTS preparation course hours varied from 36 to 42, depending on the course. Learners took an in-house placement test to determine their overall English language proficiency level and therefore in which IELTS course to be enrolled. Extensive adult courses were open to learners with a high A2 CEFR level, while the intensive courses required a minimum B1 level. Teenagers took the same placement test as the adults and could only enter an IELTS preparation course if their level was B1. Learners were of a range of different nationalities and professional backgrounds, reflecting the diverse demographics of the UAE. No data gathering on the backgrounds of the learners was undertaken because the focus of the research was on the teachers. Class sizes were capped at 18 learners and were usually between 12-18 learners. The courses were orientated towards training candidates in all four of the macro skills assessed in IELTS. The courses did not have a syllabus that the teacher was prescribed to follow. There was no circumscribed quantity of

class time that needed to be devoted to writing or Writing Task 2. Similarly, no institutional guidelines existed stating if or how frequently teachers needed to set practice compositions, nor any feedback procedures for such tasks. Findings relating to the nature of the IELTS preparation courses are discussed in the results section.

Participants

Seven teachers (the 'participants') working at a private language learning institute in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, took part in the study. The participants were all native-speaker teachers from a range of Commonwealth countries, including Australia, Canada, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the UK. The mean age of participants was 35 years (*SE* = 3.188), while the mean length of teaching experience was 8.52 years (*SE* = 4.315). Participants had varying levels of IELTS preparation teaching experience, most for at least three years (see Table 3).

Table 3
Participant Profiles

Participant pseudonym	Highest qualification in English language teaching	IELTS examiner status
Sara	TEFL-I	No
Jenny	TEFL-Q	No
Max	TEFL-I	No
Frida	TEFL-Q	No
Sam	TEFL-I	Yes, current
Robert	TEFL-Q	No
Mira	TEFL-I	No

Notably, no teacher was qualified with an MA in TESOL or Applied Linguistics, while only one participant was a current certified IELTS examiner. All participants taught either one or two IELTS preparation courses during the study. They also taught other courses at the same time that could be described as 'General English'. IELTS preparation was not a major part of their weekly teaching hours, often representing only 10-20%. Once written consent was agreed, the participants provided copies of their learners' Task 2 compositions, including their completed feedback. They later took part in interviewers with the researcher. Pseudonyms have been applied to the research participants in the present study.

Data Collection Instruments

The first stage of data gathering involved the researcher in obtaining marked IELTS Writing Task 2 compositions from the participants. Completed and marked learner practice tasks (n = 104) were collected over the six-month study. Participant feedback was coded and analysed by the researcher to produce a quantitative profile of the Writing Task 2 feedback that each participant provided. This revealed priority areas, approaches to corrections, and typical commentary methods. After, one round of semi-structured interviews was conducted by the researcher with the participants. These were undertaken to better understand the perceptions

and rationales behind participants' approaches to and focal areas of written IELTS Task 2 feedback. All participants were asked a set of questions inspired by those developed by Lee (2008) (see Appendix A). The interviews deviated when salient or unexpected pieces of information were uncovered. Participants were not made aware of their own text-analytic findings in the interviews, primarily because coding was still in progress and for ethical reasons.

Data Analysis

Coding of feedback corrections and comments. Participant feedback on learner compositions was made sense of using an original system of coded feedback points. A feedback point was defined as an individual, meaningful, and explicit item of teacher feedback directed towards any one element of the learner's writing (Lee, 2008). Coding involved approximating the nature of the feedback focus to a specific area of the IELTS Writing Task 2 assessment criteria as outlined in the public band descriptors. Examples are provided in Table 4.

Table 4
Examples of the coding of feedback points according to the IELTS Writing Task 2 band descriptors

Criterion	Comment	Correction
Task Response	Good introduction – balance and direction	
Coherence and Cohesion	Remember to organise your text into paragraphs	Concluding on this In conclusion
Lexical Resource	Have a look at course book page 91 on verbs + prepositions	It depends on (wrong word)
Grammatical Range and Accuracy	Use past participle with present perfect simple	Has went gone

Feedback points constituted two broad categories; corrections and comments. Other marks on the page where no discernible message could be identified were ignored. Corrections included all instances where the teacher either identified an error (for example underlining something, crossing it out, using an error code symbol), and/or corrected it. Corrections were tagged in terms of whether they were direct or indirect, according to the three types of error treatment outlined in Table 2. Comments were delineated as any written pronouncement on the text that was not a correction. Comments could be corrective in nature or provide learners with information about why a textual feature was faulty.

The coding of corrections and comments presented a number of challenges. It was determined that written feedback on Task Response was only possible through written commentary, which may or may not be corrective in nature. Thus, written feedback on Task Response was considered as the sum of the number of teacher comments only. Additionally, not all comments related to the four assessment criteria. Consequently, a fifth category, "other" was adopted. This was to account for generic comments such as "very good!", "what do you mean?", and "?". In many cases, a single comment was contained within the boundary

of one sentence. In other instances, one sentence contained multiple feedback points. Thus, feedback informing a learner to "work on dependent prepositions as well as articles a, an and the" was considered as two comments. Finally, owing to the variety and complexity of comments, it was decided that coding would also indicate whether comments targeted a specific feature of the writing, or if they exhibited a global, summative quality. Generally, contextual clues in the comments and the location of the comment allowed this distinction to be relatively straightforward.

Analysis of textual feedback. In terms of analysis of the coded teacher feedback, the measure decided upon was basic frequency counts, used in the study by Montgomery and Baker (2007). Raw totals of feedback points were calculated overall and according to individual teachers. Additional mathematical analyses were applied, such as investigating counts of feedback point types (as a percentage of the whole and by teacher) and identifying the average number of feedback points per teacher and composition. Statistical software was used only for the calculation of Cohen's Kappa, when uncovering the reliability of the feedback point coding. There was no effort to establish the relationship between teachers' background variables (e.g., gender, age, nationality, years of experience and feedback methods) although this could be the basis of future investigations.

Rater reliability. Contextual constraints did not permit a second rater. Therefore, in order to ensure that the feedback coding was reliable, a blind intra-rater approach using un-coded copies of learner compositions was adopted. Following Truscott and Hsu (2008), a random 10% of the practice compositions were re-coded after a three-month interval from the commencement of data collection. A Cohen's Kappa test was used to calculate intra-rater correlation, which was established as .835, with *S.E.* = .026. There was a strong level of agreement between the coding and re-coding of the feedback points over the three-month interval, κ = .835 (95% CI, .784 to .885), p < .0005. The main sources of disjuncture were over indirect corrections of grammar and lexical feedback, particularly when the teacher signalled a word or phrase that was either unnecessary or missing. Similarly, there were minor discrepancies in judgements over the single or dual information load of a few comments.

Coding and analysis of interview themes. The method of coding and analysis of interview data was undertaken by the researcher following the procedure outlined in Seidman (2006). The author outlines an approach to analysing qualitative interview data whereby individual passages of a recorded transcript are marked for meaningful chunks, grouping these chunks into categories, and then studying the categories for thematic connections within and among them to establish a handful of superordinate themes. Thematic connections relevant to the findings of the textual analyses were of primary interest during the interviews. This was particularly so when the themes that emerged from the interviews reinforced or contradicted the findings of the text-analytic results, as they emerged. The interview findings were synthesised with the text analytic results during data analysis, and connections between the two forms of data are made explicit in the interview results, presented below.

Results

Teachers' Priorities in IELTS Writing Task 2 Feedback

It was evident from analysis of the compositions that the participants provided a substantial amount of feedback to their learners on a variety of textual features. Overall, 2618 individual feedback points were identified in the analysis of the 104 learner texts, an average of 25 items of feedback per script. Out of the whole, 1831 feedback points (70%) were corrections and 787 (30%) were comments. Feedback points were not uniformly spread across the four IELTS Writing Task 2 assessment criteria, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Proportion of feedback points by IELTS Writing Task 2 assessment criteria and 'other'

	Task Response	Coherence and Cohesion	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy	Other
Corrections	N/A	4%	36%	60%	N/A
Comments	29%	17%	14%	26%	16%
Total	8%	9%	29%	49%	5%

Lower-order problems, included under Grammatical Range and Accuracy and Lexical Resource, featured as the most prevalent concerns of the participants, accounting for nearly 80% of individual feedback points. Higher-order issues such as Task Response and Coherence and Cohesion were less widespread. However, a majority of comments on learner texts related to Task Response (29%). On average, learners received over two comments on their texts relating to this criterion. Yet, it was comparatively rare for a participant to correct an error relating to Coherence and Cohesion (just 4%), an issue elaborated on in the discussion of the second research question.

There were noticeable variations among the participants in terms of the focus of their Task 2 feedback. Table 6 illustrates the differences in compositions collected and feedback points, according to each participant.

Table 6
Summary of the Total Number of Compositions and Feedback Points, by Participant

Participant pseudonym	Number of marked compositions collected	Number of feedback points	Average number of feedback points per composition
Sara	21	592	28
Jenny	13	254	19
Max	17	423	24
Frida	10	332	33
Sam	14	338	24
Robert	14	457	32
Mira	15	167	11
Total	*104*	*2618*	*25*

As is evident, most participants provided a substantial amount of individual feedback points, with two participants transmitting over 30 individual points for students to consider per composition. At face value, Mira appeared to provide less feedback than the other participants, especially when compared with Frida and Robert. However, one caveat to consider is that the informational load of participants' feedback points cannot be considered equal. Figure 1 outlines the proportions of comments, overall and by participant, according to the four Task 2 assessment criteria and the category 'other':
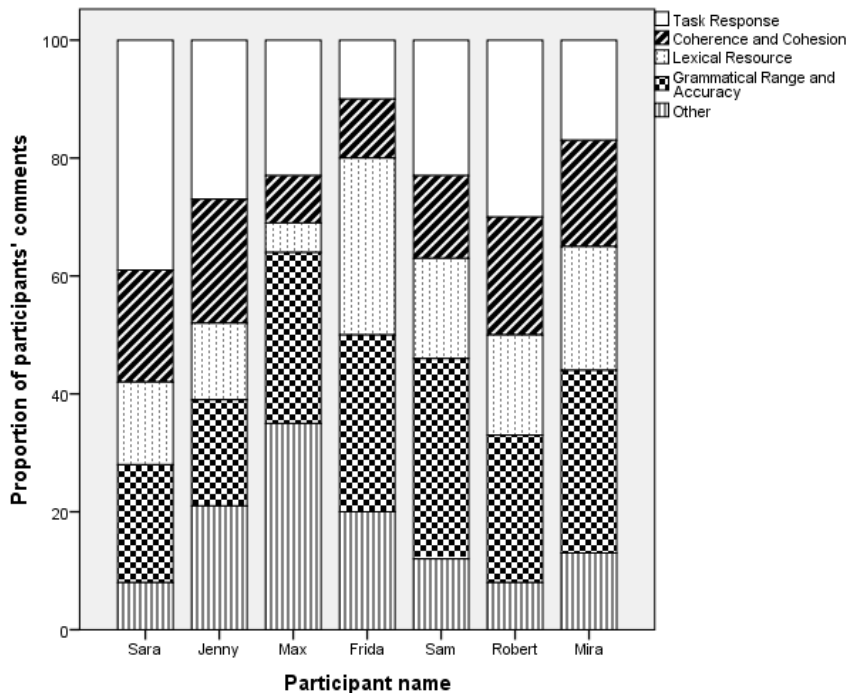

Figure 1. The focal areas of participants' written comments (as a percentage of participants' totals)

Task Response and 'other' displayed the most sizeable disparity in the range of comments among the participants. Task Response was the focus of 39% of Sara's comments, while just

10% of Frida's. Thirty-five percent of Max's comments did not directly relate to the assessment criteria of Task 2, while both Sara and Robert wrote 8% of comments classified as 'other'. In general, the proportions of feedback on Coherence and Cohesion were the most consistent between the participants, with a 13% difference between Jenny (high) and Max (low).

Participants exhibited noticeable variations in the ratio of feedback comments to corrections across the submitted compositions. Figure 2 shows the distribution of all analysed compositions on a scatterplot, with axes for the number of participant comments in relation to the quantity of corrections. Each dot represents one of the 104 marked scripts.
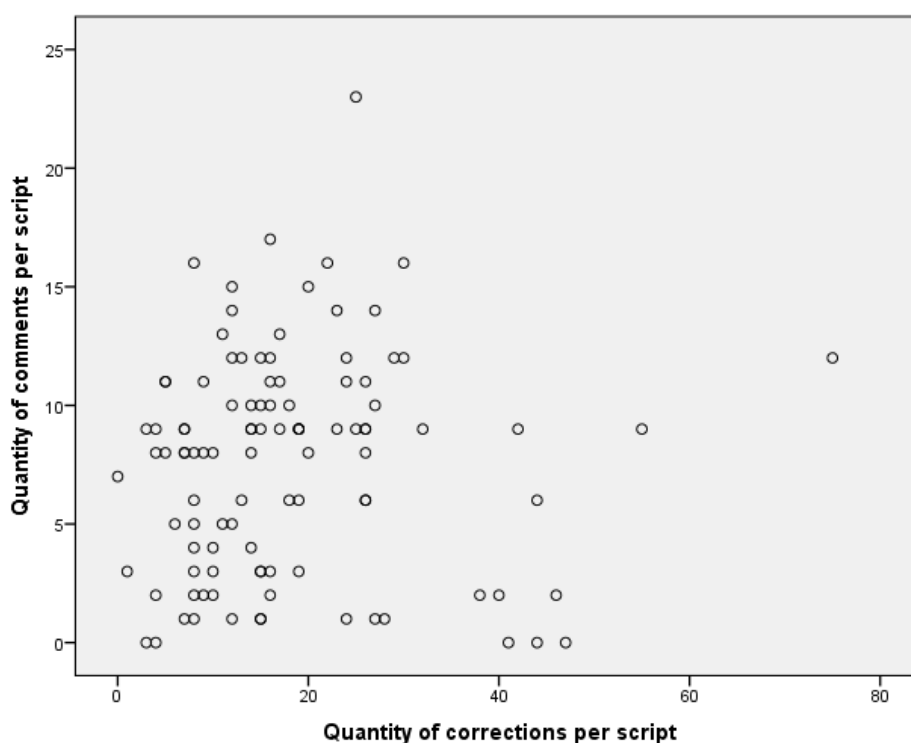

Figure 2. Scatterplot showing the distribution of corrections and comments of all scripts

Figure 2 demonstrates the sizeable variations in teacher feedback across the 104 compositions. While there was a large cluster of learner texts with up to 20 corrections and 15 comments, five learner texts featured no comments, while eight exhibited over 40 individual corrections. Across all compositions, comments occurred at a ratio of one for every 2.3 corrections (and relatively uniform among participants). The average number of participant corrections per text was 18 among the 104 analysed compositions (with a low of 0 corrections on one text and a high of 75 in another). There was an average of 7.8 comments per learner text (with a low of 0 comments in five texts and a high of 23 in a single text).

How Teachers Provided Feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2

In terms of the treatment of errors, direct error feedback was the most prevalent strategy in Task 2 feedback. Over two-thirds of all errors were treated directly, compared to two

different indirect approaches which accounted for less than a third of corrections. When indirect error treatment techniques were used, the location of the error tended to be signified and the error tagged with a coded symbol (25%). Only a minority of errors were located and flagged up, leaving the nature of the error to be identified by the learner. Figure 3 illustrates the notable variations in how errors were treated, along with differences in treatment technique by each participant.
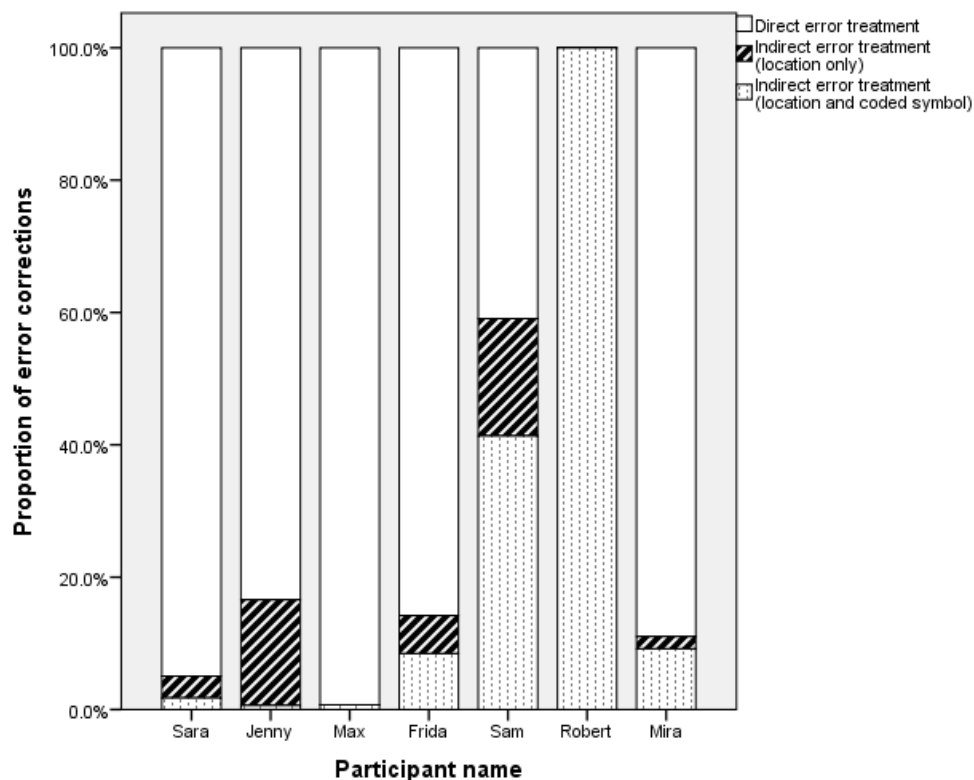

Figure 3. Type of error treatment technique on candidates' compositions, by participant

Almost every participant treated errors using a combination of direct and indirect approaches, though most opted for direct error treatment. Max and Robert approached learner error treatment with contrasting strategies, with Robert favouring both an indirect approach, Max a mostly direct one.

When participants wrote comments on learners' Task 2 papers, they tended to include a combination of targeted comments at the point of issue in the text and global comments, located usually at the end of the writing. Few texts had either specific or global commentary solely. However, there was a clear inclination towards global comments (63%) over specific ones (37%), with variation among participants (see Figure 4).
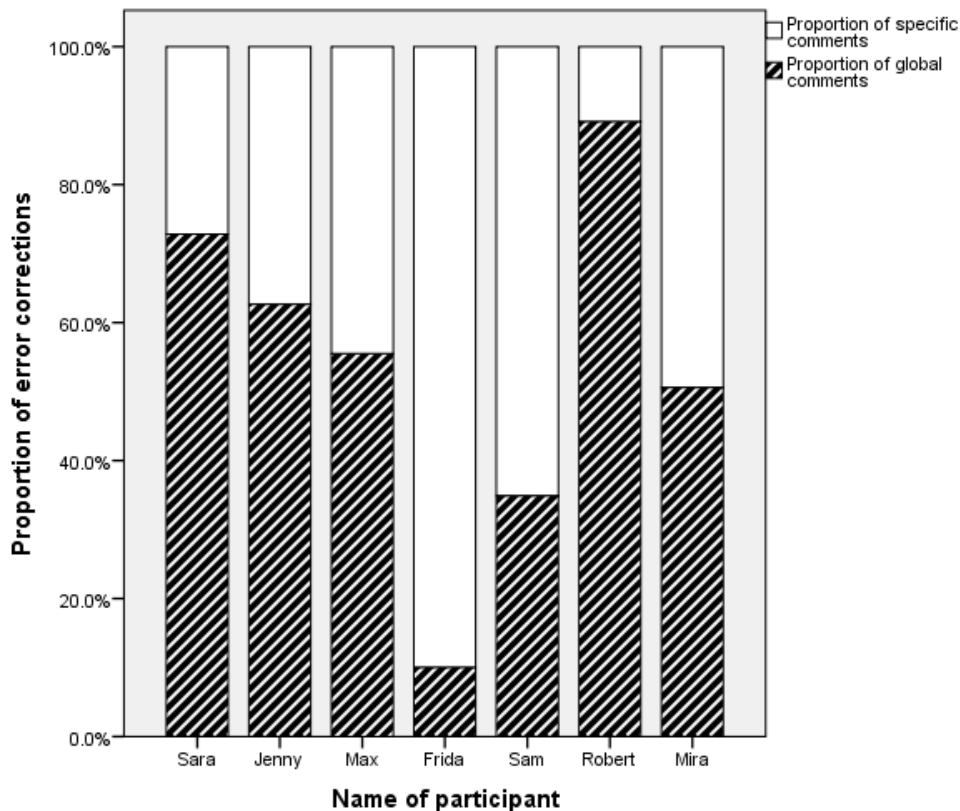
Figure 4. Commentary strategy (proportion of specific comments versus global), by participant.

Frida and Robert approached the targeting of comments in inverse ways, with the former predominantly commenting at specific points in the text, and the latter providing mostly global commentary. Some participants chose to scaffold global comments in a table, using headings to signpost the applicable Task 2 assessment criterion. Finally, one participant used a feedback handout that contained a range of pre-fabricated comments that the participant ticked, wrote a number next to (which was matched up somewhere in the text), or annotated with an additional comment.

How the Participants Taught Writing Task 2

The interviews provided information on how the participants taught Writing Task 2 to their learners. Compositions were usually written in semi-controlled, test-like conditions at multiple times during the course. Participants were conscious of the time investment required for learners to carry out authentic practice of Writing Task 2 in the classroom (usually 40-60 minutes). Therefore, full length practice compositions were also set as homework. Yet, several participants noted that learners seldom completed and submitted full practice compositions set as homework, particularly those learners on intensive IELTS preparation courses. On the whole, most returned scripts appeared to meet the 250-word minimum requirement expected in IELTS Writing Task 2, though around 10 compositions seemed visibly under length. This feature was often directly commented on by the teacher.

Opportunities for Writing Task 2 practice arose normally in two types of classroom situation. First, at the beginning of the course, many teachers saw it prudent to set a Writing Task 2 practice task as a diagnostic writing activity. The purpose of this was to determine the written proficiency of their learners at the outset of the course. Second, a task practice was given after the learners had received some tangible input on Task 2. Participants usually cited practice compositions taking place after one of the following activities: 1) a focus on the task requirements, 2) analysis of example rubrics and sample prompts, 3) examination of model responses, and 4) input on useful language (e.g., conjunctions). Few teachers mentioned using the assessment criteria as input. There was no overt obligation from the participants for the learners to do anything with the feedback, other than make sense of it and take on board the teacher's comments for the future.

Stated Areas of Feedback Focus

Most participants explicitly stated features of Coherence and Cohesion as their main area of focus when evaluating learner compositions. One shared concern among participants was paragraphing. As Sam stated, "You need to have a coherent essay and have cohesiveness in the paragraphs. Without that you can't get a good band score". Other participants explained that they focused on paragraphing in their written feedback because these were problems they perceived their learners had with writing. Both Jenny and Max mentioned tackling long, run-on sentences in their feedback; "I feel like they just kind of spurt stuff out, like they write lists of things, but they don't think how it's kind of marrying together" (Jenny). Max noted "they just think after you've written a block of text, you leave a space and start another one". Jenny stated the need for addressing key word repetition in the paragraph, with written comments like; "you need to avoid repeating words." Yet, this did not completely correspond to the text-analytic findings. Max, in particular, appeared to attend sparingly to features of Coherence and Cohesion (just 8% of comments), while Sam's focus was slightly higher, constituting 14% of all comments. Sara, Jenny, Robert, and Mira were more proactive in this criterion, identifying features of Coherence and Cohesion in around 20% of all comments respectively.

Perceptions of Learner Needs and Capabilities

A recurring conviction when asked explicitly about why they responded to their learners in the way that they did was participants' concerns for satisfying their learners and meeting their needs. "It's just come about responding to the students' wishes," suggested Max. This could be interpreted as grammatical accuracy and explain the motivational comments that do not relate easily to the IELTS assessment criteria. Several participants mentioned in the interviews that they perceived writing as a weaker skill for their learners, hence requiring sizeable amounts of feedback. As Frida stated; "it's a weaker area… in general writing is, but especially Task 2." Explicit links between perceived learner weakness in writing and the need to provide rigorous feedback to remedy this were made. Simultaneously, some participants expressed that they felt a greater burden when providing written feedback in IELTS, compared to English writing in general. Mira stated, "I feel that it's my responsibility to give good feedback." It was evident the exam exerted pressure on the teacher as well as the learners for this participant. Robert emphasised learners needed feedback on all four criteria;

"it's really important that the students get a wide range of feedback, as I said from all of the four criteria." He appeared to deliver a spread of feedback on the four criteria, though seemed more orientated towards Task Response (30% of all comments).

Yet, a number of participants expressed concerns that their approaches to feedback were limited by what their learners were capable of taking on board. Sara explained that "I never put more than three things because I think it's really overwhelming if someone gives you a whole massive range of things to work on." However, analysis of Sara's feedback showed that she provided the most comments overall (195), and second highest number of corrections (397). Concerns with overwhelming learners with feedback were particularly notable regarding the actual and potential use of indirect error treatment. Max deemed error codes too cognitively demanding for learners, for the reason that "the student practically has to learn a new language to understand the error codes." Mira put forward the view that too many corrections could be distracting or even harmful for the learner; "you wouldn't even be able to follow if I do so many of them." This was borne out in the analysis of the feedback, where Mira provided the lowest number of corrections overall (105). Thus, balancing the need to give substantial amounts of feedback with the danger of overwhelming the learners with response information was a challenge for the teachers.

Participants' assumptions of their learners as writers-in-training for an important test came to the foreground. A number of themes persisted in the questioning, with specific learner behaviours or characteristics in an IELTS preparation setting influencing the teachers' approaches to Task 2. These are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7
The impact of perceptions of learners on feedback activities in IELTS Writing Task 2

Perception	Resulting action
Learners will not understand comments lifted directly from the public band descriptors	Teacher avoids using IELTS Task 2 band descriptors for feedback
Learners want feedback on compositions on a range of Task 2 prompts	Teacher treats a learner practice composition as a final product
Learners do not see the benefit of redrafting a marked text	Teacher takes a 'final draft' approach to feedback, and does not follow up feedback
Learners expect to be taught the 'tricks of the trade' for Task 2 writing	Teacher approaches feedback prescriptively and appropriates learner texts
Learners expect to see improvements in their writing (to a specific band)	Teacher feels under pressure to provide quality feedback in sufficient quantity
Keen learners bombard the teacher with practice compositions, expecting detailed feedback	Teacher needs to invest a lot of time in writing feedback, possibly affecting depth or breadth of feedback

Several participants touched upon a recurring contradiction originating from such factors. Much feedback was provided to a learner on an individual composition, only for that text to be put away and not worked on again in the classroom. The potentially limited impact of their feedback did not seem to deter teachers, however, in providing thorough feedback. It was beyond the limits of this study to explore these contextual characteristics in much additional

detail. Further studies are necessary to establish if such factors transfer to other contexts, and the impact these have on teacher feedback in Writing Task 2.

Perceptions of the Nature of IELTS Writing Task 2 Taught at this Institution

Several participants alluded to differences in the nature of IELTS specific feedback in comparison to general EFL/ESL writing feedback. Teachers referred to a range of implicit pressures that differentiated the two, such as limited class time, more demanding learners, and the perceived need to give feedback on a wider range of textual features. Teachers also felt a belief in more prescriptive and direct feedback commentary, revealing the perception that the teachers' role when responding to Task 2 compositions was to be the judge and gate-keeper (Purves, 1984). Max noted "it's me saying 'do it this way, don't do it that way", and "in general English it's more like 'what if you tried this?'". Frida concurred, suggesting that, "it's a little more critical than other types of feedback…with IELTS there's a lot for them to comprehend". However, not all participants noted a difference in their approach. Sara stated Task 2 and general EFL/ESL written feedback practices were similar because; "the student should be aware of what the focus area is", and that "there's specific things I'm looking at whether it's general writing or IELTS". Similarly, when expressly asked, teachers were unanimously against ascribing evaluative band scores to their learners' texts. This was borne out in the text analyses, with no explicit evaluative band scores provided, and few implicit references to candidates obtaining the band score they needed in commentary. Participants' aversion to the use of explicit evaluative scores was due to a fear of potential malpractice, or concerns of repercussions in the form of student complaints in the future should such a score not be achieved in the actual test.

A Lack of Training

All but one participant reported that they had not had any formal training on how to evaluate or respond to IELTS Writing Task 2 practice texts. Frida, who had undergone such training, noted the training had happened a long time ago. She also stated it was of limited value and was not something that impacted on current feedback practices. Yet, Frida was the only teacher to have developed a relatively sophisticated IELTS writing-specific feedback system, the feedback sheet with prefabricated comments. In reference to training in providing written feedback in a general writing context, Sam mentioned that "there had been a couple of INSETTs [in-service teacher training]" some time ago. Max stated that "I have attended workshops" but stressed that "I probably don't really agree with some of the training". Sam, the one participant who was a certified IELTS writing examiner, made no reference to the examiner training as a useful experience for helping develop effective approaches to written feedback on practice compositions: "I've just developed my own strategy really – what works best in the classroom, what doesn't". When probed on the matter, Sam expressed concerns about the potential for 'insider' feedback to violate the confidentiality agreement signed between examiners and the test centre. This may explain the fact that Sam provided the five texts lacking in any commentary.

Nearly all of the participants asserted that they arrived at their current Task 2 feedback practice mostly through the knowledge and experience gained over their respective years

spent in the classroom They sometimes owed an element of their practice to the support or ideas passed on by a previous colleague. Frida, who used a feedback sheet with prefabricated comments, explained that a previous training session "was the basis for creating the feedback sheet", and that "I had expanded it and tried to make it more detailed so the learners can have a better idea about their feedback." Sara noted that she had started using a table to signpost comments according to the assessment criteria rather than "writing everything in a big block." This might explain why Sara had the fewest number of comments that were described as 'other'. Signposting feedback encouraged her to keep comments related to the assessment criteria of IELTS Writing Task 2. The participants did not always mention the support of their peers, with some approaches developing idiosyncratically. Max said, "I've just found… what the students benefit from, and it's not really the same as the training that I've had." In conclusion, the variations in feedback foci and approaches appeared to arise out of the particular beliefs, internal theories, and classroom experiences of the participants.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What Textual Features Do Teachers of IELTS Preparation at a Private Language Teaching Centre in the UAE Focus on When Responding to Candidates' Writing Task 2 Practice Compositions?

Concerns with surface level accuracy. Analysis of teachers' written corrective feedback and the resulting interview themes revealed a number of specific areas that the participants focused on. One of the key findings was that the teachers were concerned with the language accuracy of their learners, particularly surface-level grammatical features. Around 60% of all corrections and 25% of comments were grammar-related, predominantly with a focus on accuracy rather than range. The emphasis on grammar uncovered in this study mirrors the results of previous studies (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Zamel, 1985), who all found that teachers were noticeably concerned with language accuracy. This means that the cohort of teachers preparing their learners to take Writing Task 2 perceived a significant part of their role in feedback was to correct or comment on lower-order errors.

The resulting situation involves teachers potentially diverting students' time and energies towards textual features which only partially represent features of two assessment criteria (van Beuningen et al., 2012). Given the lack of Task 2 specific feedback training, a subconscious transfer of grammar-centric EFL/ESL writing feedback approaches to IELTS Task 2 may have occurred, of the kind Truscott (1996, 1999) argued against. Alternatively, as revealed by some participants, there was a perceived obligation to flag up errors in order to satisfy demanding learners. Similarly, some teachers felt that as their role in IELTS feedback involved performing 'gate-keeping' responsibilities. Not providing feedback on surface level accuracy would have been a dereliction of duty.

A lack of tailored error feedback. It was apparent that teachers did not tailor the amount of error feedback to the desired band scores required of their learners. Rather, the frequency of corrections was determined by how many errors learners made (with the participant correcting most, if not all errors). The public band descriptors for Lexical Resource and

Grammatical Range and Accuracy provide insights into the general tolerance for errors in IELTS. "Frequent" and "some" surface-level errors are tolerated at bands 5 and 6 respectively, even if they cause problems for the reader (especially at band 5). However, at higher bands, candidates can afford to make only "a few" errors (at band 7), or "very occasional" errors (band 8). The approach to error treatment in IELTS Writing practice tasks could be determined by the learner's target band. As a result, the scope, intensity, and method of treatment used could be tailored to suit the gap between the accuracy of the learners' practice compositions and the required band. A candidate requiring band 7 may need a more proactive approach to error treatment if he or she is making frequent errors. Further research is required to provide insights into whether a band-specific approach to correction is a realistic proposition for teachers of IELTS Writing Task 2 or has pedagogical merit for learners.

Variations in how feedback comments are conveyed. Variation among teachers in terms of the focus of their comments was more notable than corrections. This is likely due to the greater range of criteria comments could be assigned to. Cross-participant variation was particularly prominent with regard to commentary on Task Response, Lexical Resource and non-IELTS specific "other" issues. This variation was also mirrored in how comments were conveyed to learners. Some participants opted to signpost global comments under their related assessment criteria, while others did not. This suggests two likely implications. First, there are a wealth and diversity of textual issues that candidates needed help with in this context. Additionally, teachers have specific priorities and concerns as evaluators of Task 2 practice compositions. One consequence is that the feedback experience of the learners undertaking the preparation courses in the study differed according to who the teacher was. A consequence of this is an inequality in feedback. Some learners may have been advantaged in certain areas (e.g., those receiving signposted comments), while others (e.g., those receiving not comments), potentially being disadvantaged. Much depends on the learners' expectations of and preferences for feedback, an area seldom addressed in the academic literature.

Mismatches between textual findings and interview results. Another issue that emerged from the results is what teachers said they focused on in written feedback did not necessarily correlate with the actual feedback they provided. Nearly all participants in this study stressed the importance of feedback on features of Coherence and Cohesion, principally paragraphing, topic sentences, grammatical and lexical cohesion, and linking words. However, evidence from text-analytic feedback indicated that the quantity of corrections and comments related to this were far from being the majority. This discrepancy mirrors those studies undertaken by Montgomery and Baker (2007) and Lee (2008). Ultimately, this means some teachers were not aware of the feedback that they provided. This could be explained by the fact that participants admitted a lack of familiarity with the Task 2 band descriptors. Additionally, few participants had had any formal training in providing written feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in interpreting the apparent low interest of teachers in Coherence and Cohesion. While rates of corrections and comments appeared quite low – 4% and 17% respectively, individual instances of feedback on Coherence and Cohesion tended to be larger in scope and carry a greater informational load in comparison to incidences of grammar commentary, which were often localised and smaller in scale.

Research Question 2: How Do Teachers at This Institution Provide Written Feedback on Candidates' Task 2 Practice Compositions with Regard to Error Treatment and Commentary?

The provision of substantial feedback. The second research question was addressed through analysing how teachers approached corrections and written commentary in the compositions they marked. The results demonstrated learners received written feedback information at a ratio of 2.3 corrections to 1 comment, with on average 18 corrections and 7.8 comments per composition. Since a written comment tends to contain a higher information load than a correction (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b), it can be surmised that Writing Task 2 feedback likely involves the provision substantial amounts of feedback information. One danger that was touched upon by some participants was that excessive amounts of feedback could reduce its impact and even be harmful. High amounts of error corrections, while causing potential stress for learners, may lead them to reduce the complexity of their writing (van Beuningen, 2010). This is not an appropriate strategy for candidates aiming for band 6.5 and above since scores for Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy are capped unless complex constructions are attempted. Providing an appropriate amount of written feedback is challenging for teachers in Task 2. It varies according to their own personal preferences and/or a particular learner's expectations and demands. Further research is required to investigate how much feedback is enough/too much, particularly in the high-pressure context of IELTS where students have specific targets and often demand a lot of feedback.

A preference for direct error correction. A substantive result of the study involved the discovery of variations in approaches to the treatment of errors. Generally, the majority of written errors in Task 2 compositions were treated directly, though some participants opted for indirect strategies. Similarly, teachers' views of the role and importance of error correction in IELTS Writing development were often complex and idiosyncratic. On the one hand, some teachers were of the view that little could be done about learners' errors given course limitations, mirroring the view argued by Truscott (1996, 1999). Others regarded errors as an annoyance that could not be ignored by the teacher. Errors were corrected directly out of routine, and also so as not to distract learners from higher-order IELTS-related textual issues, particularly Task Response. On the other hand, some teachers perceived indirect error treatment to be fundamental in helping learners become more aware of grammar and vocabulary, a position advocated by Ferris (1999, 2004), van Beuningen (2010), and Hyland and Hyland (2006a). Identifying a best approach to error treatment in Writing Task 2 is challenging since learner self-treatment of errors represents a potentially sizeable investment of class time, which could be used for other aspects of IELTS.

Textual appropriation. Finally, a concern in the literature among studies of EFL/ESL writing feedback is teacher appropriation of learner texts through their written feedback (Gulley, 2012; Reid, 1994). Sommers (1982) and Zamel (1985) make the strongest case that, through error correction and prescriptive comments, teachers cross the line from reader to text appropriator, unduly influencing the style, direction, and content of a learner's writing for their own purposes. This study found that teachers viewed text appropriation as an

integral element of their role as providers of written feedback in Task 2. In the interviews, teachers referenced the need, through classroom input and feedback, to direct their learners to writing in a specific, Task 2-appropriate way; although these interpretations varied, as did the beliefs underlying them. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have an awareness of what constitutes band-specific quality writing in IELTS Task 2 in order that learner texts are not appropriated in ways that are of limited benefit (or even harmful) to them.

Research Question 3: What Beliefs and Perceptions Underlie the Nature of the Feedback Teachers Provide on Candidates' Task 2 Practice Compositions at This Institution?

Rationales for stated feedback practices. The final research question involved exploring the perceptions and motivations underlying why teachers responded to Task 2 practice compositions how they did. One consistent theme that appeared in the interviews was that each participant's approach to written feedback tended to be informed primarily by their own beliefs, values, and idiosyncrasies. Thus, teacher feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2 largely existed independently of institutional guidelines or advice or guidelines from Cambridge English, the British Council, and IDP. This reflects similar findings in general EFL/ESL writing feedback (Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Junqueira & Payant, 2015; Lee, 2008). The interview discussions of feedback foci and approaches were often framed within the individual's perceptions of feedback best practices, an area of L2 writing where there is limited consensus (Ferris et al., 2011; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Robb et al., 1986). Similarly, participants held strong views about how best to prepare learners to address the Task 2 prompt, what area(s) of the essay to invest course time training learners in, and the approach to error treatment. Some participants had developed their own feedback templates, though these had come about not through formalised training or an institutional approach. Rather, feedback techniques such as a particular error code or specific areas of focus (e.g. comments on introductory and concluding paragraphs) were arrived at during various points along the particular teacher's career journey thus far.

Implicit models of IELTS Writing Task 2. Finally, one salient finding to conclude on is that all teacher approaches to feedback involved evaluating learners' texts in relation to their own perceived, tacit models of a Writing Task 2 essay. They did not tailor corrections and commentary to learners' required band scores or follow any stated learner preferences. In the study, the teachers were not asked to write their own model Task 2 essay, which may have shed light on how the individual participants envisaged the product and process of Writing Task 2. Instead, the interviews provided insights into these latent textual models, with the importance of the written introduction and conclusion highlighted by some teachers, the organisation of sentences within a paragraph by others, etc. It is unclear from the study to what extent teachers' insights into what constitutes successful writing in IELTS Task 2 varies or aligns to a particular band. This may explain why beliefs concerning what learners needed to attend to in feedback varied as much as they did.

Conclusions

Summary of Findings

This mixed methods case study was carried out with the aim of uncovering how teachers undertook written feedback on the IELTS Writing Task 2 practice compositions their learners wrote in an IELTS preparation classroom setting. The study combined both the inductive text-analytic findings of 104 learner compositions, as well as teachers' own verbal accounts of their practices. This approach has advantages in that the textual analyses offer relatively objective accounts of how teachers provide feedback as well as their focal areas. However, the texts were not relied upon to induce teachers' purposes, a risky and likely inaccurate endeavour (Ferris, 2014). In this study, a general preference for grammar-centred, surface-level errors corrected directly was revealed; a widely-documented feature of composition feedback (Edgington, 2016; Truscott, 1996). Yet, through globally-orientated comments, teachers also evinced concern and interest mostly in learners' responses to the task rubrics. Lexis and Coherence and Cohesion seemed lesser priorities for teachers, in spite of the emphasis that was attributed to the latter in the interviews. As teachers were not 'held accountable' for their feedback, the reasons for this are unclear, though gaps between what teachers do and what they say they do is not uncommon in the field of written corrective feedback (see Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007).

Currently, there is a notable lack of studies offering insights into how teachers should and do approach corrective feedback in an IELTS preparation setting, and in other writing-for-test-preparation contexts. Owing to this and the concomitant lack of institutional as well as published guidelines from IELTS, teachers' primary rationales underlying their feedback were largely idiosyncratic. This study revealed that it was principally the teaching experiences, personal preferences for marking, individual beliefs about feedback, and perceptions of their learners which shaped teachers' feedback practices. A corollary of this was that feedback tended to be prescriptive and 'appropriating', with teachers firmly entrenching themselves as experts in IELTS. Yet, with teachers' feedback practices delineated, it became clear differing tacit conceptions of the task 2 textual product existed, although it was beyond the scope of this research to fully investigate these. Training in IELTS Writing-specific feedback was revealed to have been largely non-existent, resulting in certain unsatisfactory practices, such as ignoring learners' desired Writing band scores in feedback, likely persisting.

Implications

One implication of this study is the need for an in-house institutional training programme on Task 2 corrective feedback. Training may lead to feedback innovation, the sharing of good practices, and the 'shaking up' of ingrained approaches (Lee, Mak, & Burns, 2016). While the teachers in this study exhibited confidence in their own feedback approaches, there existed a lack of consensus on best response to learners' Task 2 writing. Thus, the basis for a Writing Task 2-specific feedback programme could involve a discussion of the best response principles in writing outlined by Ferris (2014), and how they could be implemented in a Task 2 context. In addition, the public Task 2 band descriptors could be used for training purposes, in order that teachers raise their awareness of the range of characteristics candidates' writing is assessed on. Such training could involve teachers reflecting on how they give feedback in

the four criteria and what to focus on in student texts at particular band scores. The programme could go further and provide guidance on how teachers can supply differentiated feedback for the individual learner. Yet, the three co-owners of IELTS need to consider addressing the issue of how institutions, teachers, and learners manage corrective feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2, and offer institutional and practitioner guidance on the issue, including suggestions for teacher training.

In the absence of official guidelines, institutions may need to formulate and implement their own standardised systems and models of corrective feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2. Standardised guidelines could involve a requirement for teachers to provide written commentary on each of the four Task 2 assessment criteria using a template, by using pre-fabricated comments, or an established error code. The purpose of such guidelines is to mitigate the inconsistencies and wide variations in feedback among teachers exhibited in this research. Further, it could provide candidates in training with a more consistent preparation experience. Institutional guidelines may also help encourage less experienced teachers to develop their written feedback techniques, incorporating ideas and techniques established through the language teaching organisation's agreed approach. One important caveat would be to ensure that standardisation does not stifle teacher creativity and flexibility as feedback providers, nor act as a barrier to specific feedback requests from learners.

Limitations

The findings of this exploratory study should be interpreted with a degree of caution. Primarily, the sample of teachers involved in the research was selected purposively, and was lower than comparable studies (see Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Attrition affected the study since IELTS preparation was perceived by teaching centre management as more challenging than general English teaching. Therefore, a small cohort of teachers who were considered experienced experts in IELTS preparation tended to teach IELTS at this institution. Consequently, the findings of the study represent tentative observations of how a group of teachers approach feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2 in a specific context. The results cannot be generalised to other contexts. Nevertheless, there are likely to be parallels with teachers preparing learners for IELTS in other private sector language teaching institutions. The quantity of learner compositions obtained for analysis compares favourably with other related studies, though was lower than the 175 compositions analysed by Lee (2008). It should also be noted that learner compositions were obtained from either one or two batches of marked responses. Hence, the textual analysis of this study represents a snapshot of the teachers' responses at a particular time. How a participant responded to the batch of compositions at that moment may not be fully representative of their approach.

Future Research

It would be prescient for a larger scale study to be conducted to better understand how teachers working in a wider range of countries and language teaching institutions approach written feedback in IELTS Writing Task 2. This could generate data that provides confirmation or alternative findings to the present study. A research area touched upon in this

study is the impact of teacher feedback on the quality of student writing. Yet, it was beyond the scope of the present study to investigate whether the teachers' individual approaches to Task 2 feedback led to improvements in their learners' written proficiency. Further research could use the main findings from the study, e.g., the types of error feedback and the approaches to commentary, to identify techniques and approaches that add the most value to learners' preparation. This could be done through the use of the public descriptors to compare specific learner compositions at the beginning and end stages of an IELTS preparation course, after feedback has been provided.

About the Author

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Appendix A. Interview questions

Focus on writing: How important is Writing Task 2 practice for your learners? How much time on the course do you dedicate to Task 2?

Student writing: Is student writing done in class? Is it timed? How many drafts are collected?

Feedback practice: How do you mark student writing? Do you mark using the IELTS Writing Task 2 public band descriptors? Do you mark student writing according to the student's target band? Why do you mark student writing in the way(s) you do?

Good feedback practices: Do you think 'good' feedback practice on IELTS Writing Task 2 is different to 'good' feedback practice on general English compositions? How much feedback is enough feedback?

Focus of feedback: What areas do you focus on in your written feedback? Why?

Error feedback: Do you mark errors selectively or comprehensively? Why? Can you also describe and explain your preferred error feedback strategies?

Written comments: Do you write comments on student writing? Are you aware of the range of comments you write? How do you see the functions of your comments? What do you expect students to do afterwards?

Training: Has your previous training given you any idea about how to provide feedback on student writing in IELTS Task 2? What do you know about 'effective' writing feedback in general?