Chinese EFL Students' Perceptions and Self-reported Practice of Teachers' Written Feedback in Writing Compositions

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Abstract. Teachers' Written Feedback (WTF) is a term work that serves a range of roles and purposes in teaching writing compositions. In contrast, knowing about the students' responses and perceptions of it is crucial to make it work. This paper navigates the 300 Chinese Non–major ESL students' attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral responses to TWF using a self–structured questionnaire in 5 Points–Likert items that the students notice, expect, and enact. The study reveals that though TWF to their writings lacks autonomy and creativity, mainly focus on the essential linguistic elements than the content, and very often neglect their genre to elaborate on personal views in providing evidence to opinions; still, 60% plus students are satisfied with the prevailed way of TWF that is effective for targeted exams and the texts. The study also reveals that the TWF has significantly affected students' perception feedback and clarity; TWF commentaries slightly differ from students' expectations and have no significant impact on about 20% of students, which needs improvement. This paper aims to bridge the gap between TWF practices and learners' expectations in consideration of students' attention, forming preferences, cognition processing, expectations, and, ultimately, behavioral responses.

Keywords: Teachers' written Feedback · English compositions · Process approach · Learners' response

1 Introduction

Teachers' written feedback (TWF) is one of the primary methods to respond to students' writing and is "a central element of the writing process" [1] (55). He further argued that teachers, through written comments, e.g., questions, suggestions, or criticism on students' assignment/composition, serve a range of roles to improve students' writing proficiency; still, it remains unproductive until the students respond or act upon it [2]. Thus, TWF and students' responses, i.e., perception, preference, and expectation, are complementary. Putting it simply, TWF is a two–way activity, one being teachers' stances

and their feedback practices, and the other is students' perceptions of it (i.e., processing the feedback they receive) [3]. The learners' are the primary doer bringing feedback to action, and study on their responses to TWF practice is a must.

Many studies on TWF in the Chinese ESL writing context depict that students have limited focus on writing skills and strategies [4] and lack coherence and cohesion [5]. The students' insufficient knowledge of different genres to elaborate personal statements and evidence to support opinions in students writing [6], therefore, are not reaching the intended writing goals [7]. In this regard, [8] found that mainly Chinese native teachers' feedback rarely focuses on Macro level items in students' compositions. This incongruence points to the need for students' perceptions of TWF and their response to it – the present study's focus. To this end, the present research aims to explore Chinese ESL students' responses to teachers' written feedback from two dimensions: the first is about students' preferences for teacher feedback they like to receive; the second is about their reactions (attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral) to teacher feedback they received. In addition, we briefly examined teachers' written feedback practice and students' expected TWF on their compositions in recursive writing.

2   Review of the Literature

2.1   Significance of Teacher Written Feedback to Students' Writing

In the process approach, Teachers' written responses are believed to act as an information bridge to fill the gap between a learner's current knowledge, understanding, skill, and desired performance [9, 10]. It pinpoints students' strengths and weaknesses, motivates them to acknowledge their hard work well [7], and prepares them for further writing. Many researchers [11, 12] have concluded that TWF with clear instructions and balanced coverage, e.g., focusing on content, structure, organization, language, and style, becomes effective on students' revisions and boosts L2 learners' confidence. Conversely, suppose TWF is incomprehensible or with no explicit instruction to correct their texts. It may ensure adverse outcomes such as overconfidence in students writing or "…feeling that their instructors are incompetent or lazy" [10, 14, 15] (133) that affects their future L2 writing.

However, studies on students' response and preferences of TWF in the ESL writing context has shown mixed result; their response varies significantly for different reasons. For example, regarding focus and form, some pay more attention to form, while some focus on content or both [15]. In their study, Elwood and Bode [19] found that Japanese tertiary students preferred both. While Chinese ESL students preferred and prioritized TWF on content and organization over accuracy in grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation [18]. Next, studies revealed that students tend to engage more substantively with imperative than TWF in question forms [19]. Yemeni EFL University students appreciated praises on their draft that helped them build confidence.

Similarly, in terms of explicitness, students' responses to teachers' written feedback have shown inconsistent findings. For example, ESL students in the universities of the USA preferred direct feedback and expected to get all their errors corrected in TWF; students from Hong Kong secondary classrooms preferred direct feedback on ideas and content and wanted fewer comments on errors. The Oman, Sudan, and Egypt students

expected unfocused indirect written feedback. In terms of usefulness, the majority of students viewed TWF as applicable. In the Chinese ESL context, students preferred and reported verbal corrective feedback more effectively than written corrective Feedback for Chinese non–professional college students. Zhu [11] found that the multiple feedback mode, "peer feedback + teacher feedback" (23) combination models, affects the validity of feedback and enhances Chinese ESL students' awareness of feedback input and revision in academic English writing. The above review has shown inconclusiveness in the different ESL settings by diverse learners. Zhang [14] stressed that the students' doubts and problems in Chinese students' ESL writing could not be solved positively by the TWF, which has negatively impacted the overall students' writing skills. However, there are few studies on Chinese ESL students' responses to the TWF.

2.2 Students' Response to Teacher Written Feedback: Significance

(1) Students' Attitudinal Response to TWF

Learning achievement depends on learners' attitudes, emotions, and beliefs towards that subject, instructor or instruction, which make up the effective learning domain. We can observe learners' positive, negative, and neutral emotions during and after TWF. In this regard, TWF also becomes useful when positive influences surround students and students willing to interact with it positively. Conversely, student's poor negative attitudes to the teacher and TWF, such as feelings of disappointment, incompetence, lack of confidence, hopelessness, worry, mistreatment, anxiety, misunderstanding, rejection, confusion, and even hatred, weaken in development of writing skills [26–28].

TWF is a highly valued and preferred model to promote ESL students' revision in the learning–to–write process [12, 13, 24]; ESL learners commonly show a positive attitudinal response, e.g., the feeling of appreciation, welcome, satisfaction and happiness to it [8]; however, the students' attitudinal responses and preference to different written feedback modes vary. For example, Japanese ESL learners prefer handwritten feedback to others [19], whereas Iranian learners prefer computer–mediated TWF [21]. Similarly, US university students prefer face–to–face and e–written feedback in offline and online classes in their manuscripts. Based on Lam [33], Chinese EFL learners are more attached to TWF than to automated feedback. Hence, the attitudinal response: the feelings and emotions, judgment, attitudes, values, motivations, and appreciation in TWF are undeniably connected to students' perception or preference of it and impact the cognitive field, such as mental development (logical thinking and reasoning) and emotional development.

(2) Students' Cognitive Response to TWF

Written feedback through different influential strategies to improve students' cognitive and language progression, such as editing and correcting drafts [10]. The TWF strategies, such as questioning, confirming, justifying, and reasoning, help notice the content and erroneous form. It encourages writing sound sentences, brainstorming ideas, creating an outline, comparing their writing with TWF, and making revisions [24]. Additionally, it activates the knowledge and belief of learners about themselves and their

previous knowledge, developing them as self–regulated and independent writers. Therefore, through their written feedback, teachers should acknowledge the learners in setting personal learning goals, guiding and engaging in developing ownership of their writing as per individual needs [29]. Students also need to notice the precise details to be learned consciously, paying attention and working with them [17] using cognitive and metacognitive strategies (e.g., understanding, evaluating, planning) to integrate their mental procedures.

According to Kim and Bowles [19], WCF needs higher cognitive engagement than direct corrections, and indirect feedback needs more cognitive engagement than direct feedback, enjoy and engage with specific features with direct, focused, explicit, and corrective TWF. However, The Learners' cognitive response (i.e., cognition) differs in the processing as per feedback types. The learners mostly expect clearly interpreted written comments and prefer explicit forms among the underlining, error–coded, metalinguistic explanations [22]. In contrast, the hedged comments, students' limited knowledge of teacher feedback, insufficient practice, and inadequate feedback due to a lack of commitment to the truth value of a proposition elevate the cognitive burden of processing WF are some reasons that frustrate and hinder the production of quality writing [34].

Students mostly prefer written feedback from a professor or teacher that helps them revise the substantial part of their compositions [38]. Still, many students need help receiving, interpreting, applying TWF information and making revisions. Thus, TWF practice also needs to go beyond the cognitive dimension to assist learners in achieving their cognitive goals rather than providing comments or grading on the final piece of writing. These all allude to the necessity to observe students' preferences for cognitive development and to prepare students to surmount and cultivate critical thinking skills around writing.

(3) **Students' Behavioural Response to TWF**

Behavioural responses refer to learners' traceable behaviours and performance after receiving feedback, including revision operations and observable strategies for raising writing accuracy, language competence or other aspects [27]. Student's behavioural response to TWF is sometimes conceived of as behavioural engagement for making the change to the things one knows more than when started [23]. However, some studies have reported that students do nothing or rarely see revising their Writing upon TWF on the finished work. If students do not access revision or think they do not have to assess in revising their texts in response to feedback and judge their knowledge and skills (self–assess) accurately, feedback carries less weight. TWF, therefore should not only facilitates students' through different stages, such as planning, drafting and revising in assignments/compositions writing, but it also should stimulate learner's realities and be responsive to keeping them engaged by providing clear, concrete and timely text–specific comments, praise and constructive criticism as per student needs and preferences, error type they commit, and cognitive engagement for greater accuracy in subsequent writing task [37].

While drafting and redrafting ideas in their composition or assessment writing, learners often face real attitudinal, cognitive and behavioural challenges. Such as feeling that teacher feedback is incorrect, unreasonable or unjustifiable, unable to use it for effective

revision, may lack of motivation due to the mismatch between what they receive and what they expect from the teachers, etc., which may hinder the development of ESL students writing skills. In L2 writing settings, students' responses to teachers' feedback are expected in the form of revisions in their drafts. Therefore, TWF should be valued and preferred first to promote students' revision [30].

3   Research Method

The primary purpose of the present study is to identify Chinese ESL students' (non–English majors) perception and preferences on teachers' written feedback, specifically, their attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioural responses to TWF, including local Chinese English language teachers written feedback practices and students' expectations.

This study employed survey research using a quantitative approach to investigate Chinese ESL students' perception of TWF in their composition writing. We purposively selected 3 Non–normal universities [2 from Guilin and one from Chengdu] and 400 student participants. All the participants aged between 18–21 have already studied one year of Bachelor's course in their respective majors, and none are with majored in English. Though we received 337 participants' responses, only the data from 300 students were used in this study as the rest of other participants were found majoring in English language education.

The items in the self–structured questionnaire on the five Points–Likert scale was adapted from many researchers [14, 37]. The questionnaire consists of five sections. Except for the first and fifth sections (participants' basic information, open ending question: What types of TWF do you expect in your compositions writing?), other sections comprised 52 statements related to four facets of TWF– (a) students' impression and emotional feeling to TWF–Attitudinal response [10 items], (b) students self–reported practice: reaction and usefulness in respect of the content, Logical organization, and linguistic elements–Cognitive response [11 items], (c) students' self–act reaction on TWF use– Behavioural response [6 items], (d) the TWF students receive, and the frequency of such practices [25 items], and respective frequencies. For Sects. 3–5, the ranges of choices were scored from 1 (Strongly Disagree or Never) to 5 (Strongly Agree or Always) on a Likert scale; 3 was labeled as neutral. The items were converted to Xingxing online form, and all data were analyzed using percentages.

4   Findings

4.1   Frequencies of Teachers Written Feedback: Students' View

Based on the students' self–report of the frequency of each type of written feedback they received, the overall feedback provision was criteria based. Most of them reported that they were not allowed to choose and decide what to write and had no freedom in writing. Half of the students reported TWF had suggested they focus on the genre, purpose, context, and the readers' knowledge. However, comments on the organization of the composition and expression of the ideas were limited to 10–20%. Next, two third of the
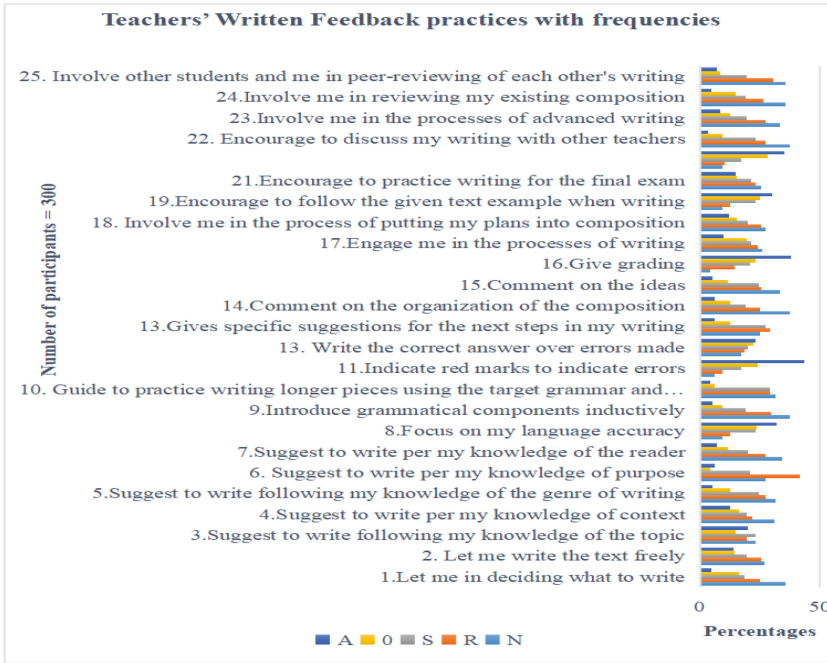
Fig. 1. Students received teachers' written feedback practices and their frequencies

students reported that they got more feedback on linguistic elements, mainly on grammatical error correction, vocabulary, and other mechanics. Over 60% were reminded to focus on language accuracy and grammatical errors but did not determine the student's strengths and weaknesses and how to improve. About 73% of the students reported getting only feedback using codes, and over 60% of the students' grammatical errors get corrected with a correct answer over errors made. Few students (less than 20%) indicate a straightforward way to correct errors. The feedback on the topic, content, context, and organization selection was limited to 20–30%. A crucial point to note is that almost 63% of the teachers have preferred grading without any justification.

Similarly, the report revealed that though around half of the students got suggested and were encouraged to follow the given text example for improvement, about 55% still needed to receive specific suggestions for the next steps in their writing. Around 70% reported no encouragement in discussing their writing with other teachers and peer–reviewing. Conversely, less than 20% of teachers' encouraged and involved students existing composition self–reviewing process. 65% of the students felt that teacher feedback mainly encourages practicing writing for the final exam. Figure 1 provides details of the nature and frequencies of TWF students' received.

4.2   Students' Attitudinal Response to Teacher' Written Feedback

Regarding students' attitudinal response, most students hold a positive impression of their teachers' written feedback. More than 60% of students found the TWF very specific,
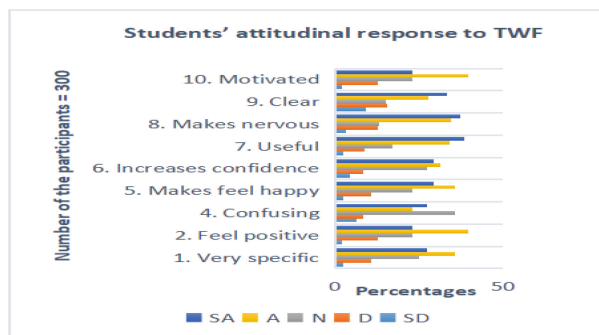
Fig. 2. Students' attitudes and emotional feelings to receiving TWF

helpful, and clear and responded that getting TWF brings positive vibes to their writing. Similarly, about 50% of students found TWF confusing and made them nervous. Data also revealed that nearly 20% of students remain neutral. Among the responses, the most favourable thing about written feedback that made them happy was its clarity (66.67%). Figure 2 provides the students' feelings and impressions of TWF.

4.3 Students' Cognitive Response to Teacher' Written Feedback

Students' cognitive response related to their reaction and usefulness revealed that the majority (about 62%) could make the proper use of TWF, which made them more conscious of their errors in vocabulary, grammar, vocabulary punctuation, which immensely benefited in reducing errors in linguistic elements in their composition. However, TWF did not pay much attention to the Macro–level, like the content, the organization and the flow of expressing their opinions in compositions. Despite the majority of students knowing what they have to do to improve their writing, still 30% of the students hold
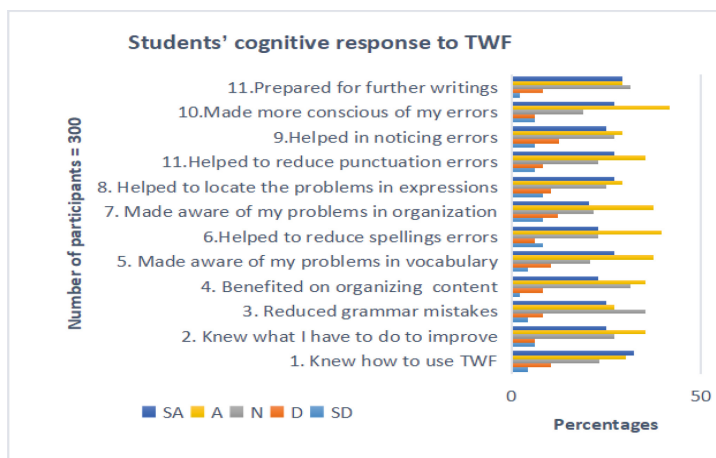
Fig. 3. Students self–reported ability in different aspects of composition using TWF

a neutral position in response to whether TWF helped them prepare for further writing, which depicted the lack of confidence in their writing. Figure 3 provides the students' cognitive response to using TWF.

4.4   Students' Behavioural Response to Teacher' Written Feedback

Figure 4 provides the students' self–report of making revisions and working on compositions after getting TWF. The participants' behavioural response revealed that about one–third (about 32%) neither read the teachers' comments on their composition, 30.28% did not correct them, and 28.75% made revisions. Next, about 27% did not seek an alternative solution; only a few (less than 20%) made predictions. In short, students did not take TWF seriously.
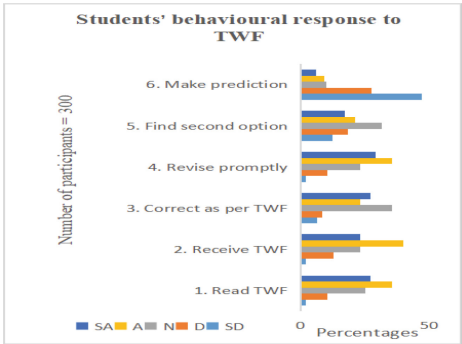

Fig. 4. Students self–reported act or revision upon and after getting TWF

4.5   Students' Expectations of TWF in Writing

The students' feedback expectation on TWF displays divergent results. Regarding the duration of time, more than half of students (about 53%) expect feedback within a week. About 75% and 25% expect it on every draft and final draft only, respectively. Similarly, two third of the students expect feedback on their new draft with the initial draft that shares the same characteristics. Regarding evaluating their composition, 78% of students expect justified scores, and more than 60% expect general praise or criticism of their composition. Surprisingly, the two third of the students expect elaborated praises with explanations but do not expect explanations in their criticism. Around 70% of the students expect errors targeting language accuracy using codes, underlining them and in corrected form over errors made. Many of them (more than 80%) expect short, clear and concrete feedback. About 70% of students expect to cover macro–level, such as content, organization and development in terms of meaningful ideas. Students expect TWF to be supplemented with oral feedback, teacher–student oral discussion and peer feedback. At the same time, about two third of the students expect teachers' feedback encourages them to self–assess their writing, reflecting on strengths and weaknesses, to
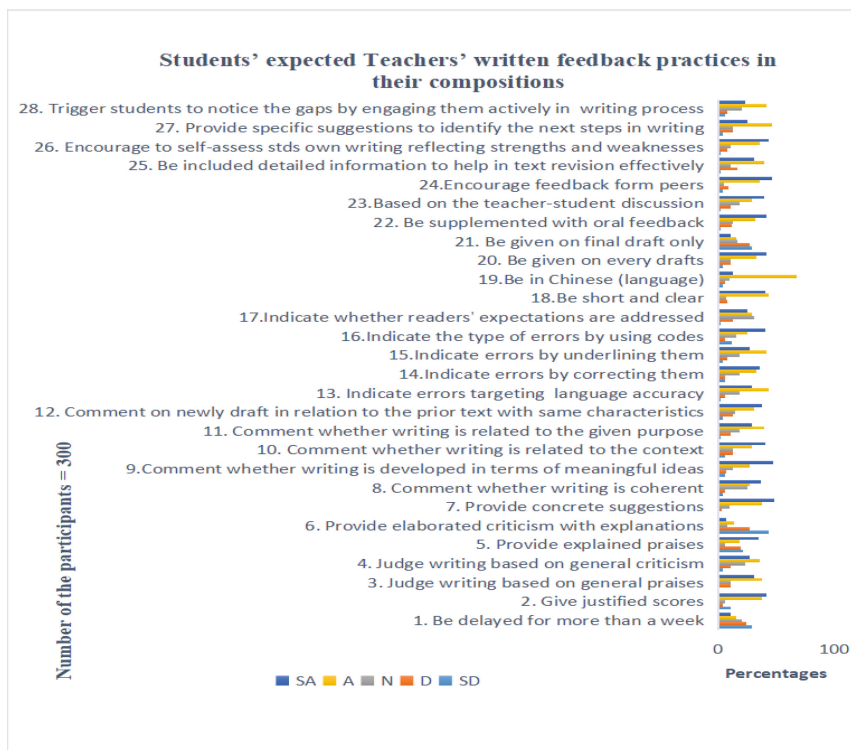
Fig. 5. Nature and types of TWF Students expect in their composition

help in text revision effectively and identify the next steps in writing. Moreover, students with the teacher's feedback could help notice the gaps in the writing process. Figure 5 provides the students' expected and preferred teachers with written feedback on their compositions.

5   Discussion

L2 writing is a complex activity in which the three elements: attitudes as students' immediate emotional responses, cognition as noticing and processing the input (i.e., TWF), and response in behaviour (revision/act upon it) are interdependent and integral parts in L2 writing [9] In this respect, teachers are expected to use feedback practices that suit learners' needs and concerns, bridge the linguistic gap by avoiding appropriation, ease the student's cognitive operations reducing cognitive load in learning [24]. Additionally, the inquiry of these menouviors needs to get a deeper understanding of the teacher feedback to produce the expected effect [39, 40], which impacts highly in helping teachers develop effective feedback practices on the whole process of teaching and learning writing [14, 25, 27]. However, understanding the different aspects of L2 student responses from the non–English speaking world to their ESL teachers written feedback or written

corrective feedback, mainly students' such as learner reactions, attitudes and emotions, learning/revision behaviours, and engagement, is a complex task.

Despite some limitations, the outcome of this study implies several essential pieces of information about students' responses to written feedback practice in the Chinese ESL context. Overall, the research found some mismatch and imbalance between the types of feedback they received and their expectation for the short and long run. First, students mainly got feedback on their Micro–level (i.e., grammatical conventions, spelling, punctuation, appropriate word choice); conversely, they got much less attention on the Macro–level, i.e., quality of information, coherence and organization, expressing ideas, and concept development. Additionally, teachers mainly respond to student composition by correcting errors made (71.5%) and followed by coded feedback (21.6%) in writing composition. This acknowledged students' weaknesses and corrected them, making them happy, but one–third of students needed clarification about how they performed in their composition and more confidence for other writings. Teachers' most prevalent written feedback strategy in their draft was locating and correcting errors as the final product; only a few provided written feedback in all drafts. The findings above reveal that the students' problematic linguistic aspect harms their writing quality.

Second, students needed to engage with TWF better. Instead, it stopped them from striving to find a solution and made them passive about their writing skill in other writings. About 30% of students needed help understanding their teachers' written feedback and reported that they could not interpret and act on it accordingly. Most teachers graded students' compositions, restricting them from making revisions. About one–fifth (17%) of the students (excluding those who responded neutrally) did not take part in cognitive operations, such as opening comments and conforming the TWF to consider whether it differs from their perceptions or not (i.e., noticing their reactions both intellectual and emotional), locating and reviewing the relevant feedback (most practical, least valuable and confusing), knowing what she/he should be changing, i.e., wholly rejected revision of their composition. One–third of the students, through feedback, could not partner with the positive motive to identify more blind spots, attempted to follow the teacher's suggestion or address the problem identified in the compositions, and it hindered landing closer to the target (revisions). Teachers' feedback focus and engagement in constantly providing needed information in learning could also ease the student's cognitive operations, reducing cognitive load. TWF should be implemented as judging student compositions or assignments by the teachers to be corrected as a final product rather than facilitation [15]. According to Amelia et al. [28], TWF on the final piece of their assignment is unproductive as students just put their papers away and forget about the comments.

Third, the feedback comments and encouragement provided more in grammatical errors and language accuracy than compositing writing skills development such as planning, organizing, expressing ideas, reviewing own composition to initial draft affect other writing, and writing to a different genre. There is a need for more explanation or clear information in teachers' current written feedback practice. The target linguistic components like grammar and vocabulary are explained inductively, and feedback should encourage students to practice Writing longer pieces of advanced writing. Teachers gave less feedback on the content, organization and flow of students' ideas on their composition, and about two third of the students wished for an equal amount of suggestions in all

aspects. Consistent with this, studies have shown that TWF to correct errors in students' compositions not only lacks autonomy, creativity, and motivation [36]; predominantly focus on the students' problematic linguistic aspects harms their overall writing quality [14, 35]. Next, nearly half of the students expected teachers, through written feedback provide specific ideas or ways of putting their plans into composition and more inductive feedback while writing longer pieces using the target grammar and vocabulary.

In short, students have improved in noticing and understanding their weaknesses and strengths through written feedback from the teacher in their English composition writing, especially on Macro– level items. They have developed a sense of achievement in their exams too. The teacher engaged them to some extent through written feedback, which changed students' attitudes, knowledge, and understanding of how they should act on TWF. Nevertheless, TWF practices failed to integrate the whole context of teaching and learning writing. As Goldstein [32] criticized, teachers' vague, non–text specific, primarily negative written comments on students' composition could not address the question, what did students learn from feedback? Furthermore, it seems uneffective in developing students writing skills. Teachers' written feedback was expected to focus on or engage them on what content they are interested in, their need for both short and long run, the current level of their language and what he/she is attempting to improve.

6   Conclusion

This study investigated Chinese ESL students' feel, act, and expectations of TWF they received. Interestingly, the finding showed that most students appreciated positive feedback practices through attitudinal, cognitive and behavioral responses. However, the result also depicted that most students responded positively to the teacher's feedback for clarity and short–term goal. They thought that teachers' feedback on grammatical accuracy was to help them avoid fundamental errors in writing and get good marks in public exams. After the teacher corrected the errors, they did not strive to find the solution. It was helpful and clear in the short run, but they needed to make some changes to improve their writing quality. Surprisingly, they doubted their competence, which showed that they preferred TWF for short–term convenience.

Still, a mismatch and imbalance are found between the types of feedback they received and their expectations—five issues their teacher needed to consider for making written feedback effective in the long run. First, feedback only on the last draft and encouragement without detailed, precise information was not enough to support the learning process and develop writing competence. Second, TWF strategies like correcting student errors were the ones that made them happy and feel favourable to teachers' feedback in the short run. It was somehow helpful in language accuracy and helpful in making students understand their errors which supported the completion of the tests. Conversely, it had not made the students understand the materials, not so fruitful in developing confidence in further writing. Third, along with providing suggestions, the teacher must be engaged in rechecking how the students work on each feedback or suggestion. Additionally, nearly one–fifth of the students seemed to be inactive to teachers' feedback. It may be either they did not understand the TWF well, or it resulted from a lack of regular feedback and centered on correcting grammatical errors only. Learners

often remained neutral to TWF during the process, which may turn neutral to positive or negative in L2 writing.

Even though this study had examined the students' responses to teachers' written feedback on their composition by questionaries, we could not involve students in interviews and the teachers' comments on their composition due to strict measurement in controlling Covid. Thus further study on Chinese university non–English major students' responses and preference for TWF in composition writing is worth conducting.

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