The mediating effects of student beliefs on engagement with written feedback in preparation for high-stakes English writing assessment

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A B S T R A C T

Research in L2 writing contexts has shown developing writers' beliefs exert a powerful mediating effect on how they respond to written feedback. The mediating role of beliefs is magnified in preparation for high-stakes English writing assessment contexts, where tangible outcomes pivot on successful test performance. The present qualitative case study utilises data from semi-structured interviews to investigate how the beliefs of three self-directed IELTS preparation candidates mediated their affective, behavioural, and cognitive engagement with electronic teacher written feedback across three multi-draft Task 2 rehearsal essays. Utilising a meta-cognitive conceptual approach (Wenden, 1998), the study identified seven themes: 1) self-concept beliefs regulated engagement, 2) reliance on the expertise of a quality teacher, 3) engagement was mediated by individuals' learning-to-write beliefs, 4) belief in comprehensive, critical written feedback, 5) feedback deemed transferable was more comprehensively engaged with, 6) entrenched test-taking strategy beliefs hindered engagement, and 7) supplementary self-directed learning activities were considered of limited value. The implications for practitioners of IELTS Writing preparation and the IELTS co-owners are discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Student beliefs and response to written feedback on L2 writing

The relationship between L2 developing writers' beliefs and their response to written feedback (WF) remains a notably under-explored dimension of second language writing (Han, 2017; Rummel & Bitchener, 2015). In L2 learning settings, beliefs can be characterised as "individual subjective understandings, idiosyncratic truths, which are often value related and characterized by a commitment not present in knowledge" (Wenden, 1998, p. 517). Results from several second language writing studies (Han, 2017; Hyland, 2003; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Yu, Zhang, Zheng, Yuan, & Zhang, 2018) indicate beliefs play an important role in mediating WF response since they shape students' perceptions of L2 learning processes (Wenden, 1998), guide or constrain response activities (Hyland, 2003), and influence students' willingness to accept and act on written feedback (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

Most visibly in research exploring feedback response from the perspective of individual learners (Han & Hyland, 2015; Han, 2017; Yu et al., 2018), its perceived value often depends upon beliefs about the expertise of its provider (Hyland, 2003; Liu & Wu, 2019), while an unwillingness to respond may cohere with detrimental self-concept beliefs (Waller & Papi, 2017).

There exists a body of literature going back 30 years that has investigated L2 students' beliefs towards effective written feedback strategies. Research has consistently shown students strongly believe in the value of timely, individualised instructor WF, rating it more valuable than peer feedback (Cunningham, 2019; Ferris, 2011; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Liu & Wu, 2019; Saito, 1994). Many students express a strong desire for localised form-focused written feedback (FFWF) (Diab, 2005b; Elwood & Bode, 2014; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Saito, 1994), reflective of a belief in the importance of error-free writing (Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011). Research has shown more autonomous developing writers are happy to take responsibility for correcting their own errors through the support of a metalinguistic code (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994), accompanied by the expectation that the teacher points out the location of errors and expeditiously provides the 'correct' response. Additionally, L2 developing writers are positively disposed towards content-focused written feedback (CFWF) in the form of commentary on textual issues that is detailed (Chen, Nassaji, & Liu, 2016; Elwood & Bode, 2014), encouraging (Treglia, 2008), and expressed clearly and concisely (Liu & Wu, 2019).

Several studies (Han, 2017; Manchón, 2009; Zhang, 2010) have adopted a *metacognitive* conceptual model of student beliefs (Wenden, 1998, 1999), whose defining tenet is the assumption that students' metacognitive knowledge constitutes *theories in action* that help them reflect on and develop potential for learning (Barcelos, 2003). The model's attractiveness lies in its operationalisation of student beliefs as stable, statable (i.e., manifest), although sometimes incorrect knowledge about language, learning, and the language learning process (Wenden, 1998) and assumption of the cause-effect relationship between beliefs and actions (Manchón, 2009). There is a recognition that beliefs are multi-dimensional (Manchón, 2009), comprising person-, task-, and strategy-related aspects (Wenden, 1998, 1999). While Wenden (1999) acknowledges this body of knowledge may change over time, the model has been criticised by proponents of the *contextual approach*, who view beliefs as both static and situated/fluctuating and not necessarily consistent with learners' actions (Mercer, 2011). Thus, it is possible for beliefs to continually emerge, fossilise, and be revised or dispensed with altogether (Han, 2017). Such flux is not guaranteed, particularly as beliefs concerning one's identity and emotions tend to remain entrenched (Aragão, 2011; Mercer, 2011). Widespread uptake of the contextual approach in empirical L2 writing research has yet to materialise, perhaps owing to the complexities involved and the approach's repudiation of belief/action cause and effect (Manchón, 2009).

It is only more recently that the mediating effects of beliefs on student response to written feedback have been investigated explicitly (Han, 2017) or as an outcome of a separate inquiry (Han & Hyland, 2015; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Yu et al., 2018). Han (2017) developed a typology of student beliefs that mediated their *engagement* with written corrective feedback (WCF) (Table 1) drawing on the *affective*, *behavioural*, and *cognitive* dimensions operationalised by Han and Hyland (2015). The affective dimension denotes students' attitudinal responses towards WF, such as their perceptions of value and the possible emotions receiving such feedback might evoke (e.g., anxiety, frustration). The behavioural dimension concerns the revision operations (e.g., deletion, correct revision, no revision) undertaken in response to WF and activities and strategies learners undertake to improve the accuracy of drafts or develop their L2. The cognitive dimension encompasses depth of processing as well as the cognitive and metacognitive operations involved in making sense of the information and undertaking revisions. Han (2017) adopted Wenden's (1998) person-, task-, and strategy-related categories of beliefs, utilising evidence generated from semi-structured interviews and retrospective verbal reports carried out with six Chinese undergraduate students undertaking an integrated English skills course. The author found beliefs guided students' selection of learning strategies, revision operations, and external resources in response to FFWF (behavioural and cognitive engagement). Additionally, student writers' self-concept shaped their emotional reactions, with learners possessing lower self-esteem or belief in their ability feeling less shocked or frustrated with FFWF (affective). Promisingly, students developed more sophisticated and balanced perspectives as they gained experience processing and responding to feedback.

1.2. Student beliefs in writing for test preparation purposes

Studies investigating the mediating role of L2 developing writers' beliefs on their engagement are mostly located in the

Table 1

Categories and sub-categories of mediating learner beliefs (Han, 2017).

Categories of beliefs	Sub-categories of beliefs	Codes emerging from the data
Person-related beliefs	Self-related beliefs	(a) L2 self-concept (b) self-concept about learning in general
	Teacher-related beliefs	Beliefs about the teacher as (a) an authoritative source of knowledge, (b) an evaluator, (c) a motivator, (d) a facilitator
	Peer-related beliefs	(a) Validity and (b) accessibility of peer support
Task-related beliefs	Beliefs about L2 learning	(a) Communicative competence versus test performance and (b) more freedom and a higher demand on learner autonomy
	Beliefs about L2 writing	Beliefs about (a) revision approaches and (b) revision operations
	Beliefs about WCF	Beliefs about (a) the value of WCF, (b) the limitations of WCF, (c) the type of WCF
Strategy-related beliefs	Beliefs about L2 learning strategies	Beliefs about (a) the effectiveness of a strategy; (b) when and where to use a strategy
	Beliefs about online resources	Beliefs about the trustworthiness of online resources

particularistic settings of tertiary-level English language support programmes (Han & Hyland, 2015; Han, 2017; Yu et al., 2018). A very different learning-to-write context is preparation for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Writing test. While no research could be retrieved that has explored the beliefs-engagement relationship in these settings, a few studies address student test-taker beliefs, reported directly by candidates themselves or inferred from their stated learning behaviours, often as part of a broader inquiry into IELTS washback or the role/impact of discrete test preparation (e.g., Allen, 2016; Chappell, Yates, & Benson, 2019; Mickan & Motteram, 2009).

IELTS is a high-stakes, on-demand test, providing evidence of test-takers' English language proficiency (ELP) for mostly academic admission purposes. One component, Task 2, requires candidates to produce a short written argument in response to an impromptu issue, drawing upon their personal perspectives, knowledge, and experience as sources of evidence. Investing time, money, and effort into discrete IELTS preparation may indicate test-takers believe their interests are best served by developing familiarity with the testing system and test-taking skills, rather than attending to ELP (Ingram & Bayliss, 2007). Similarly, the widespread activity of single-draft simulated rehearsal essay writing (Bagheri & Zare, 2009; Estaji & Tajeddin, 2012; Hu & Trenkic, 2019) suggests candidates view Task 2 as a form of product writing and that gaining experience of writing within test conditions is crucial. Such views are not necessarily mistaken, with research showing preparation can facilitate modest gains in performance (Rao, McPherson, Chand, & Khan, 2003), if merely through enhancing candidates' coping mechanisms and confidence, and lessening anxiety (Chappell et al., 2019; Winke & Lim, 2014).

Research into IELTS candidates' Writing test-related beliefs reveals several perspectives that could be described normatively as mistaken or unhelpful. One belief is in purported shortcuts to improving scores (Yu, 2014), which may comprise memorising inter-changeable template responses to tasks or lists of academic-sounding vocabulary (Chappell et al., 2019; Liu & Stapleton, 2015; Wray & Pegg, 2005). Allen's (2016) mixed methods study of 190 Japanese undergraduate students indicated many resorted to reading study guides rather than practising their writing because they believed skill development required a knowledgeable partner to correct their writing, a finding mirrored by Mickan and Motteram (2009). Pearson (2019) study revealed a high proportion of test veterans publicly doubted the reliability of IELTS Writing assessment on an online public forum, often because the expected linear score gains across multiple test attempts did not materialise. The view that achievement is a matter of luck has also been expressed by some (probably desperate) candidates (Mickan & Motteram, 2009). Nevertheless, no research exploring how these and other beliefs impact on how candidates engage with WF solicited during Writing preparation could be uncovered.

Such test-taker beliefs are likely shaped by information originating from various sources. The first is official information from the test's co-owners, such as pronouncements about task expectations, how the tasks are assessed, and test conditions (IELTS, 2019). The IELTS partners go further than merely providing descriptions of the test, commercially purveying preparation materials and courses that elaborate test-taking strategies (Winke & Lim, 2014). It is anticipated such information profoundly influences the emergence of learning-to-write and test-taking strategy beliefs. A second source of information, one which is not accessible to all candidates, is prior test experience (Allen, 2016). While the IELTS partners provide limited feedback on Writing (in the form of a condensed single score), reflections on performance may distil into beliefs about what went wrong or how the task could have been approached differently. A third influence is folk-knowledge (Bailey, 1999), widespread across social networking services. Oftentimes, this is of questionable value (Allen, 2016; Chappell et al., 2019; Yu, 2014), leading to the formation of unhelpful beliefs or task approaches.

The present study addresses the deficit in existing knowledge by exploring how the beliefs of developing writers in this context mediated their engagement with written feedback on simulated Task 2 rehearsal essays. The outcomes may helpfully serve to influence how practitioners of IELTS Writing preparation address written feedback in learner rehearsal writing. The design and implementation of the study was guided by the following two research questions:

(a) What beliefs mediated the engagement with written feedback of three learners undertaking self-directed preparation for IELTS Writing Task 2?
(b) How did these beliefs mediate their engagement?

2. The study

An instrumental, explanatory case study design was adopted. With three participants, the study constitutes a multiple case study, informed by the concept of the instrumental case (Stake, 1995). This denotes an inquiry where the researcher investigates a particular phenomenon that bounds each case, in this instance, the mediating effects of learner beliefs on L2 student writing. Typical of case studies in educational research, the study utilises interpretive methods (semi-structured interviews) situated within a real-life, contemporary learning context to generate detailed understandings of the phenomenon, aggregated across cases (Khan & Van-Wynsberghe, 2008; Yin, 2009). A sample size of three individuals was selected to provide sufficient balance between the need for rich, detailed findings and managing study complexity. The purpose guiding the nature of the knowledge generated is the explanatory case study (Yin, 2009). Explanation is understood as a set of causal links that are usually too complex to be identified through experimentation (Yin, 2009), conceptualised at the individual and inter-case level. The former constitute interpretations of the (combination of) factors that contributed to the outcomes at the individual case level, while the latter concern why one case is different or the same as others and sense making of puzzling or unique findings (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

The study explored how the beliefs of three candidates preparing for IELTS in a self-directed fashion mediated their affective (attitudinal and emotional reactions), behavioural (revision operations and processing strategies), and cognitive (framed as un-derstandings) engagement with written feedback. Data collection centred on discrete, one-to-one learning-to-write projects encompassing three rounds of Task 2 rehearsal writing using prompts selected by the researcher (Supplementary material, part A). The

participants were asked to revise each essay once in response to asynchronous, electronic FFWF and CFWF provided by the researcher. Afterwards, a semi-structured videoconferencing interview conducted remotely in English over the platform *Zoom* was held querying their engagement and beliefs, with a copy of the essays and feedback available to the participants on-screen. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts to identify seven cross-case themes in the data.

2.1. The participants

Three individuals undertaking self-directed preparation for the Writing test were recruited onto the study via a public advert placed on an IELTS-orientated Facebook group. None of the participants were known to the researcher prior to enrolling on the project. The findings presented in this study constitute data collected from the recruited individuals who all happened to be two-time veterans of the IELTS test, and form part of a wider study into engagement with written feedback in an IELTS preparation context.

Kushal, the first participant to be recruited, was a Hindi-speaking Indian male in his mid-twenties who had trained as a doctor in India. He was undertaking IELTS preparation in order to enrol on the two-year UK Foundation Programme that enables non-UK citizens to practise medicine in the National Health Service. Kushal was a CEFR B2-C1 English user, having achieved 6.5 and 7.0 in Writing in two IELTS tests, undertaken one and three months before enrolling on the project. His test performance fell short of the programme's demanding requirement of Writing band 7.5, invalidating satisfactory outcomes in other areas. Kushal had been undertaking part-time IELTS preparation, in particular an online course provided by *My IELTS Classroom*, to which he attributed the 0.5 band increase in performance in his most recent test. The second participant, Yuri, was a professional draftsman in his late twenties from Russia. He was the only participant undertaking the General Training IELTS test, with the ambition to obtain permanent residence (PR) in Canada. Yuri targeted 7.0 in Writing to boost the number of ELP points he could obtain to acquire Canadian PR. He considered this an inflexible minimum standard since other facets of his application (e.g., age, marital status, offspring, profession) were less malleable. On the first test occasion, his Writing score fell short by 1.0 band. However, dedicating himself full-time to preparation for five months paid dividends, resulting in 6.5 in his second test.

The final participant was Min Jung, a citizen of the Republic of Korea in her early twenties. Min Jung had been undertaking IELTS preparation for six months in order to meet the entry requirements for a Bachelor of Nursing degree at a university in the northeast of England, from which she had already received a conditional offer (requiring 6.5 in Writing). Both test attempts, taken six months and one week prior to joining the study fell short of the institution's cut-off score by one band. The lack of progress indicated in the second test was a source of disappointment given the perceived effort put in. Min Jung's participation in the study represented one of multiple teacher-led IELTS preparation activities, including one online course and two face-to-face writing-centred programmes at private academic institutes taught by Korean and American teachers. In addition, she had previously written over 20 simulated Task 2 rehearsal essays and would stay up until the early hours of the morning carrying out self-directed preparation.

2.2. The teacher/researcher

All assessment of student writing and written feedback was undertaken by the researcher, an L1 English user from the United Kingdom. The researcher's ability to accurately assess student writing in this context was founded upon several years' experience marking authentic IELTS scripts in a professional capacity. Additionally, the researcher possessed an MA in Applied Linguistics and eight years' prior experience of teaching English as a foreign language (including IELTS preparation), the latter frequently requiring the provision of form- and content-focused written feedback.

2.3. Procedure

Once the learners consented to participate in the study, which had been approved by the ethics committee of the researcher's institution, an introductory 20-min semi-structured interview was organised over Zoom, structured around the guide presented in Supplementary material, part B. The purpose was to meet the learners and explore the beliefs, expectations, and preferences they held towards Task 2, learning to write, and written feedback that might influence the design of the WF. Thereafter, the first task prompt was emailed to the participants accompanied by instructions on the conditions in which to undertake the essay (i.e., within 40 min, no reference to external sources). Once returned, the researcher assessed the response using the public band descriptors and provided written feedback targeting key textual issues relative to the individual's goals.

The composition and written feedback were returned electronically to the learners to undertake one round of revisions, which were typically re-submitted within one to three days. Even though atypical in these settings, revisions guided by the WF provided a structured and less pressurised opportunity to better meet the requirements of learners' target scores. Basic instructions were enclosed explaining how to address the CFWF and FFWF. Participants submitted a second draft, for which a final round of largely summative WF was provided by the researcher. A 60-min semi-structured interview to explore students' engagement with CFWF and their manifest beliefs (flexibly employing the schedule in Supplementary material, part C) was held, usually within 24 h after the second round of feedback had been returned. Following this, the participants were emailed essay two, which followed the same procedure. After the learners had completed three rounds of writing and interviews, they participated in a 30-min closing interview (Supplementary material, part D), centred on evaluating the WF and exploring possible evolutions in their beliefs over the project. Participants progressed through the three rounds of composition writing and revisions at their own pace. The project was completed most quickly by Yuri (17 days, the time between the initial and closing interviews), followed by Kushal (25 days), and Min Jung (44 days).

2.4. Written feedback

Written feedback was orientated towards helping learners cope with the demands of the test as well as comprehensively addressing form issues. In-text and global comments addressed deficits in the content and organisation (Task Response and Coherence and Cohesion) of participants' essays relative to their required band scores. The information was often presented idiographically, i.e., within the context of the given essay/prompt. A metalinguistic code was utilised to facilitate learner self-treatment of lexical and grammatical errors (Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy). WF often referenced the public band descriptors, the standard against which the texts were assessed. As participants' band score goals differed, there was variety in the foci, explicitness, and comprehensiveness of the WF. Written feedback was transmitted asynchronously, usually several hours to a day after the response had been submitted. The feedback was accompanied by three sample essays provided at different band scores to help the learners notice gaps between their written performance and the target. A sample of the WF is presented in the Supplementary material, part E.

2.5. Data analysis

The data generated by semi-structured interviewing were subject to thematic analysis comprising six iterative and recursive stages, following the outlines of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2017). First, transcripts were read and re-read for the purpose of gaining familiarity, with emergent patterns, quirks, and intriguing notions labelled with a note. Further re-reading of the texts and initial notes led to identified beliefs being assigned a descriptive code (e.g., 'WF should adopt a critical tone to facilitate improvement', 'not discouraged by WF pointing out every error'). Beliefs were operationalised as Wenden's (1998) metacognitive theories in action, meaning students' stated, albeit possibly incorrect knowledge which was interpreted by the researcher as mediating their engagement with written feedback. Common links between codes were identified across cases and clustered into themes organised around a central organising concept ('Belief in comprehensive, critical WF to highlight deficiencies').

Generating themes combined inductive and deductive analytical approaches, with a priori categories from existing literature (Han, 2017; Manchón, 2009; Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2010) informing the categorisation and labelling of themes. Particularly influential were the categories and sub-categories of Han (2017), see Table 1, although these were not implemented deductively, since some sub-categories were not relevant (peer-related beliefs) or were considered too specific for the context of WF (beliefs about WCF). It was necessary to constantly move between transcripts, codes, and nascent themes, combining, clustering, and collapsing codes and themes in an effort to generate themes that possessed both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Results and discussion

Seven themes were present in the data (Table 2), aligning with the metacognitive model of L2 learner beliefs (Manchón, 2009; Wenden, 1998). The prevalence of codes comprising the themes is indicated in parentheses. As with several WF on L2 writing studies (Han, 2017; Hyland, 2003; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Zhang & Hyland, 2018), learners' beliefs were found to play a prominent role in influencing what written feedback they made use of and how. Particularly prevalent in terms of the quantity of discrete codes was the regulatory role of the three individuals' self-concept beliefs, reflecting the capacity of high-stakes assessments to affect candidates' perceptions and feelings related to themselves as language learners.

3.1. Person-related beliefs

3.1.1. Self-concept beliefs regulated engagement

The most prevalent belief to mediate engagement, perhaps because its effect was felt across all three dimensions, was candidates' self-concept. Self-concept refers to an individual's beliefs in their competency and affect in a specific domain (Mercer, 2011), derived from one's past experiences and broad self-evaluations (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Participants' self-concept as developing writers preparing for a high-stakes language test was determined by prior test experiences and preparation efforts. Both activities contributed mastery experiences in the domain, opportunities for appraisal (through soliciting feedback), and knowledge of frames of reference against which to judge the qualities of their writing (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2002).

Prior test failures and lengthy efforts invested in preparation to as-of-yet no avail undermined the self-concept of the three participants. Lack of authentic test feedback (see Pearson, 2019; Hamid, Hardy, & Reyes, 2019) contributed to mystifying IELTS Writing

Table 2

Belief categories, sub-categories, and themes present in the data.

Categories of beliefs	Sub-categories of beliefs	Themes
Person-related beliefs	Self-concept beliefs	Self-concept beliefs regulated engagement (17)
	Teacher-related beliefs	Reliance on the expertise of a quality teacher (13)
Task-related beliefs	Beliefs about learning to write in a Task 2 context	Engagement mediated by learning-to-write beliefs (11)
	Beliefs about written feedback	Belief in comprehensive, critical written feedback (11)
		WF perceived as transferable to other essays more comprehensively engaged with (9)
Strategy-related beliefs	Beliefs about test-taking strategies	Entrenched test-taking strategy beliefs hindered engagement (11)
	Beliefs about supplementary activities/resources	Supplementary learning activities considered of limited value (9)

assessment for Kushal and Yuri, who possessed vague ideas about what had gone wrong previously. Kushal stressed, "*the main area where I'm lacking, I think, personally is the Task Response, like, how to correctly answer the task. What is the requirement of the examiner?*", while Yuri reflected, "*I had been really vague, you know, like a politician, everything coming to your mind, you know, sometimes it wouldn't even make sense*". However, neither seemed aware of what they needed to do to address deficits in how they approached the task. In contrast, Min Jung believed, "*I need a little more time for improving my grammar correction to get 6.5*". She equated the amount of effort put into extensive preparation to score gains and became disappointed when these did not arise across the project: "*I think I put it too much effort, at least I have to get a 6.5 either 6*".

Self-concept beliefs regulated participants' behavioural and cognitive engagement with comments suggesting elaborating or refining their responses to the task. Yuri reported lacking the knowledge and experience of the issue outlined in the prompt ("*I can't be aware of everything. You know, how it works in other countries?*") and insufficient knowledge of process writing ("*I do not possess the knowledge how to start and restructure this*") to undertake the suggested revisions. In contrast, Kushal felt constrained by, "*only one* (main idea) *that like came to my mind*" during the simulated writing and felt, "*I'm lacking just to make sure it is relevant to the task*", perhaps resulting from his insistence on drafting new content in simulated conditions rather than reflecting more deeply on the (often) advisory messages contained in the written feedback. More worryingly, Min Jung's low self-concept, stemming from consistent under-performance across both simulated and revised writing, stymied her efforts to revise. She failed to undertake substantial content revisions to address the consistent lack of a clear position because, "*I have a really a lot of bad which is the my lack of the point, which is the task response*". In the case of WF that flagged up an incomplete essay conclusion, she stated "*I know* [it's] *too short because, but the thing is, I don't want to be the wrong anymore. That's why I give up to write answer*".

3.1.2. Reliance on the expertise of a quality teacher

A further person-related belief was in the dependence on the outside expertise of a teacher experienced in IELTS preparation. The perspective that test-takers, particularly those who have yet to reach their goals, exhibit reliance on external support is a notable socio-affective preparation strategy (Allen, 2016; Mickan & Motteram, 2009). Unlike self-concept beliefs that affected engagement at the level of the individual essay or CFWF point, dependence on outside assistance underscored engagement globally across the study. That is, this belief determined individuals' participation and raised their buy-in once they had come to better understand the nature and extent of the WF and the benefits of participating in the interviews. Participants' preconceived notions of teacher quality seemed to centre on the feedback provider's L1, nationality, and professional background. For instance, Yuri recalled a negative experience working with a non-native English-speaking tutor who believed, "*the more you fancy words you in incorporate in your writing the best it seems for them*". Min Jung, who had multiple experiences of face-to-face IELTS preparation courses stressed, "*I'm just happy to share with someone because you're Britain and you worked like British Council. I mean, you already know about the background that makes me a little bit relaxible*". Yet for her, native-speaker status did not automatically equate to teacher quality, as she noted one of her L1-user teachers was, "*quite lazy… I think they just write down, writing one word and then nothing else*".

While Allen (2016) ascribes teacher dependency to a lack of personal agency, in this study the learners felt unable to remedy gaps in test-taking skills by themselves, similar to Chappell et al.'s (2019) finding that candidates preparing for IELTS Writing often do not know what constitutes 'good' preparation. Integral to reliance on outsider feedback by Kushal, a high-level learner, was the provision of textual appropriations that, "*could have given me a better perspective or an idea of how I should approach this sentence or how I should make this change*". This belief mediated his engagement by causing him to ignore CFWF that did not reformulate or exemplify a way forward, yet also led him to believe there was a singular 'right' way to approach the task, based on the provided reformulations: "*I think the example of actor that you mentioned. I think it was required though… I should have written about it*". Kushal's dependence was further exhibited in the way he credited his 0.5 gain in his second test to Alice (a pseudonym), his instructor on a previous online preparation course. Min Jung, unable to autonomously produce content that constituted a clear position, noted, "*I think it was quite helpful that you attach it about the explanation, like idea. Like, for example, you put it idea for me*", referring to condensed main arguments provided to help her generate supporting ideas that fully addressed the prompts (e.g., young adults are dependent on parents for financial help to buy property/their wedding).

As in other contexts, the learners lacked awareness of WF approaches and alternatives (Diab, 2005a), believing the feedback provider employed the 'right' strategies and holding an attachment to the strategies employed (Ferris et al., 2011; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994), albeit after a lack of initial buy-in during essay one. Yuri stressed his inexperience as a developing writer meant he could offer limited feedback-on-feedback: "*I do not know what options do I have…I'm not a teacher. I'm not sure about this*". He reacted lukewarmly to a proposal to provide more encouragement since he favoured critical WF. As a weaker writer, Min Jung exhibited notable difficulties successfully acting on written feedback, yet offered no critical perspectives nor sought changes: "*this doesn't need to change anything for the what I'm doing now. No, comments is really actual help because I realised oh, this sentence I should be deleted*". She lacked the confidence to put forward her own perspectives of the 'truth' of their textual strengths and weaknesses, nor how these were communicated through feedback. This is a concerning finding since, as Hyland and Hyland (2006) emphasise, "the most important role of response is to help students to develop into independent writers who are able to critique and improve their own writing" (p. 96).

3.2. Task-related beliefs

3.2.1. Belief in comprehensive, critical written feedback

Task-related beliefs encompassed learners' perspectives towards learning to write and written feedback in this context and were embodied in three themes. The first was participants' explicit preference for comprehensive, critical written feedback, a pervasive view among L2 learners generally (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994). All expressed a desire to uncover the deficits in

their writing, framed as 'flaws', 'mistakes', or 'errors' (with no differentiation between the surface or global level), such that this constituted a key motivation for participation in the study. Kushal was a strong believer that, "*feedback should be critical*" because, "*if you're not criticising the essay he/she is not going to improve*". Underlying this preference was a belief that enhancing written outcomes in Task 2 was contingent on knowing your weaknesses and improving on them. When probed, it was apparent the participants often conceived this as a preference for FFWF, mirroring the findings of much prior research (Diab, 2005b; Elwood & Bode, 2014; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994). Variations in preferences across the participants were exhibited. The more linguistically proficient Kushal initially believed minor grammatical issues could be ignored as his focus was on TR from the outset, while Min Jung was enthusiastic for thorough correction. This reflects a long-held perspective that weaker writers tend to conceive of responding to WF as a largely surface-level corrective activity (Barkaoui, 2007; Radecki & Swales, 1988). None of the participants acknowledged that excessively critical WF could be discouraging, instead holding the view that praise constituted unnecessary mitigation (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

The perceived redundancy of praise contrasts with prior studies of students' written feedback perspectives (Ferris, 1995; Straub, 1997). Straub (1997) found developing writers value praise for the affirmation it provides, boosting their confidence and motivation to learn. However, it is also the case that praise does not tend to induce revisions. As a result of the high-stakes context where the participants were impatient to reach their targets, praise was considered superfluous because it failed to offer utility. Instead, Kushal and Yuri believed praise could result in stagnation as it did not provide guidance on the actions needed to be taken to address the performance deficits the learners were acutely aware of through prior test failures. It was also considered an abdication of the feedback provider's all-important textual authority (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990), since the students perceived the role of the provider was to diagnose and criticise. Instead, the participants preferred constructive CFWF that outlined and modelled alternatives (Treglia, 2008), in the form of reformulations, appropriations, and suggestions of suitable essay ideas and how to better develop existing points.

3.2.2. Engagement mediated by learning-to-write beliefs

Prominent in the data was the powerful effect of beliefs towards the act of revising a Task 2 essay. The more proficient English users, Kushal and Yuri, did not extensively engage behaviourally with the WF on essay one because they believed practising new written compositions in exam-like conditions offered greater affordances. Revisions, while considered helpful for clarifying and developing ideas, expanding the range of vocabulary, and correcting errors, resulted in texts that did not accurately reflect their written performance. Barkaoui (2007) stresses that students unfamiliar with revising may need to be persuaded of its merits, i.e., that efforts editing, reordering, deleting, and appending material will improve their writing and thinking skills in the longer term. This perspective changed over the course of the project, so that their views aligned more closely with Min Jung, who considered revising a Task 2 essay provided a more actionable opportunity to respond to WF than a new composition (although who often responded by merely deleting problematic content): "*for me so much more helpful to revise about new structure with the different word about the second essay. Can be more closer to about the answer with the essay*". This change in perspective was due to Kushal and Yuri's difficulties achieving their desired scores in a first draft, increasing the appeal of revising their work under the less pressurised conditions of the second draft. Since the participants believed they could learn from their mistakes, they were more invested in the low-risk activity of correcting first draft errors, although the need to ignore errors owing to content-based revisions undermined this perspective somewhat.

The divergent learning-to-write beliefs exhibited frustrate the potential development of standardised feedback guidelines in IELTS preparation settings. One particular instance concerned beliefs towards main or supporting idea suggestions on first drafts. Both Kushal and Min Jung believed in the importance of WF supplying examples, the former because he conceived effective learning to write embodied mimicking the approaches of native speakers ("*If I can't copy the same thing, at least I can try and, like, make a similar sentence*"), while the latter perceived a deficiency in her ability to generate Task 2-compatible arguments. In contrast, Yuri personally disagreed with some of the ideas expressed in longer appropriations, causing him to reject the WF. For instance, a suggestion to elaborate a proposed solution by outlining its feasibility was rejected because, "*IELTS do not, as they say, do not judge people for their intelligence, and when they ask sometimes weird questions and, it is a solution, it's not about, how 100% practical is it*". Therefore, in this context, content suggestions may be deemed helpful alternatives that reduce the uncertainty of CFWF (Treglia, 2008), but can also be considered overbearing appropriations.

3.2.3. Transferable written feedback more comprehensively engaged with

A key challenge in the provision of WF is clarifying the nature of good performance as feed-forward information that helps learners close gaps in future writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Kushal and Yuri stressed that the demands of Task 2 varied according to task topics and framing. Yet these learners also believed there existed generalisable approaches to the task that could be learnt through written feedback, often in combination with a rehearsed (and even memorised) approach to writing development. This was outlined by Yuri, who desired, "*a teacher explaining or a sample essay, and it says, for example, to achieve band 8 in task response, you should write, for example, like this, like main body paragraphs talking about this*". As a consequence, deeper affective and behavioural engagement was exhibited when the participants believed WF contributed knowledge or strategies transferable to other task prompts and topics. This was evident in learners' attempts to redirect discussions of individual WF points into generalisable principles ("*So where I am writing, for example, five sentence I need to write six in order to fully develop that paragraph*", Kushal), reifying statements in the public band descriptors into absolute terms ("*"occasional" would mean like two or three errors? Maximum five? If I can reduce the number of my errors to like one or two, for example, just slips, error slips will that fetch me a 9 in grammar?*", Kushal), and expressing anxiety towards open-ended, prompt-specific feedback ("*I'm almost driven crazy with IELTS uncertainty… because nobody can say for sure for certain that it's 100% way to do this*", Yuri). A predilection for generalisable strategies are an inescapable outcome of high-stakes language testing (Wray & Pegg, 2005), arising out of candidates' natural instincts to lower cognitive pressures in the test. In this study, such beliefs seemed harmful,

leading the participants to engage superficially with idiographic CFWF and narrowing their repertoires of writing skills and rhetorical functions (Winke & Lim, 2014).

3.3. Strategy-related beliefs

3.3.1. Entrenched test-taking strategy beliefs hindered engagement

Despite prior test failures and a reported reliance on outsider insights provided by written feedback, the three participants exhibited a certain amount of scepticism and even resistance in WF response. Their preparation efforts over the course of many months and previous test experiences resulted not only in awareness of test-taking strategies of various scope and credibility (Allen, 2016; Winke & Lim, 2014), but the formation of firmly held beliefs towards the requirements of Task 2. In some cases, these appeared naïve, as illustrated by Min Jung's use of memorised material in formulaic introductions in order to, "*put a rephrase about the question*", Yuri's belief in, "*some kind of an example at the end of the paragraph*", and Kushal's perception that, "*I've heard that examiners, they also give you some extra marks for like when you're using a conditional*". Such beliefs may have arisen owing to the overwhelming pressure to achieve desired performance goals, resulting in the learners being seduced by simplistic or misleading sources of information (Yu, 2014). Such beliefs contributed to restricting the diversity of learners' L2 writing repertoires (Winke & Lim, 2014), resulting in instances of cookie-cutter approaches. This perspective often clashed with the idiographic WF encouraging the candidates to address the prompts more 'organically', since the public band descriptors say little about genre considerations.

In other instances, strategy-beliefs seemed well-founded. Kushal was weary of writing long essays because his previous tutor Alice stressed that she, "*would like to see your essay to be more concise*", while Yuri emphasised that *IELTS Liz* had taught him about the importance of consulting the assessment criteria when writing. When CFWF challenged or violated strategy-related beliefs, it was often quietly resisted. This finding coheres with Storch and Wigglesworth (2010), who uncovered that higher-level ESL learners tended to ignore WF that contradicted the beliefs they held. Kushal's pre-occupation with word limits curtailed his willingness to further extend his points as recommended in the WF in all three essays: "*But if I keep on writing about this example, and expand on that, that's about reach like 400 words. I need to be more concise*". Yuri's rejection of, "*charming the reader*" through "*fancy words*" and "*intelligent ideas*" led him to question or ignore WF that took issue with suggested solutions in essay two that were deemed perfunctory: "*it's not about, how 100% practical is it but just, I think this way, maybe it's wrong, but it's my point*". It was only towards the end of the project that naïve or mistaken test-taking strategy beliefs began to be questioned, with Min Jung complaining, "*I really can say I spend a lot of time for the bad teacher*" and Yuri bemoaning preparation advice that, "*explained everything wrong at the beginning of their preparation*". That fossilised test-taking strategy beliefs continued to negatively impact on student engagement was because the participants failed to recognise that they had originated from dubious online sources, comprised folk knowledge, or seemed a naïve interpretation of how Task 2 is assessed (Allen, 2016; Estaji & Tajeddin, 2012).

3.3.2. Supplementary learning activities considered of limited value

One set of beliefs that mediated mainly Min Jung and Yuri's behavioural engagement was that self-directed learning activities supplementary to the WF were considered of limited value. These included perusing the sample essays, watching YouTube tutorials, and submitting essays for automated writing evaluation. A lack of value stemmed from learners' doubts over their own capabilities and a perceived need for external support. Instead of the sample essays offering opportunities to notice features of other writers' approaches and become more self-aware of their own writing (Bagheri & Zare, 2009), Min Jung and Yuri reported little value in analysing the models. Min Jung emphasised, "*it's not about the read the sample essays, it's not can be the solution*" because she could not generalise features of the sample writers' approaches for use in her own texts: "*I couldn't make sense. It wasn't like an essay… the essay was like looks me like diary, like explain about the story just they just described*". As with his own writing, Yuri was left wondering, "*how did they get all such score*", resulting in disagreement with one higher-level sample: "*this example, band 8 sample you sent me it was extremely, you know, flabbergasting because I, it was it for me for me it was just a mess of fancy words*". The sample essays lacked sufficient scaffolding when used for self-directed learning purposes. Perhaps had the marks been explained, the outcome might have been different.

4. Conclusion

As a case study examining the mediating effects of student beliefs on engagement with written feedback of just three learners, the findings of the study are not generalisable. It should be recognised that, in the absence of official guidance from the IELTS partners, the content and delivery of my written feedback was idiosyncratic, exhibiting biases (e.g., a priority on Task Response) that impacted on and contributed to learners' unfolding beliefs. Similarly, while I endeavoured to assess students' texts accurately according to the public band descriptors, mistakes could have been made, impacting on the framing of the written feedback and as a consequence, the exhibited beliefs. A challenge for any study investigating engagement with written feedback is capturing the complexities of the contexts, participants, variables, and processes (Mahfoodh, 2017). Unfortunately, it was beyond the time constraints of the interviews to explore the mediating effects of learners' beliefs towards lexicogrammatical errors. Additionally, a notable limitation emanated from the language barrier that arose from the research taking place in the second language of the participants. To varying degrees, the learners encountered difficulties expressing their meanings with sufficient complexity, describing the nuances of how they felt and thought, and explaining their beliefs. As such, the study offers incomplete insights into how learner beliefs mediated engagement with WF in these settings.

A key assumption underlying IELTS preparation is that enhanced familiarity with the testing system allows candidates to better meet the expectations of task types, develop coping mechanisms, and boost test-taking confidence (Chappell et al., 2019; Winke & Lim,

2014). It has not been widely researched that preparation also contributes to the formation of beliefs concerning how learners might meet their goals. The present study found that underscoring many instances of superficial or misdirected engagement with written feedback were unhelpful person-, task-, and strategy-related beliefs. Particularly prominent were participants' low self-concept beliefs towards their ability to respond appropriately to CFWF, identify and remedy textual issues autonomously, and derive benefit from self-directed supplementary learning activities. These stemmed from prior unsatisfactory test performance, disappointment with written outcomes on the project, and weaknesses in ELP. Each learner exhibited dependence on the outside expertise of the researcher to comprehensively diagnose and explicate problematic textual issues (Allen, 2016; Mickan & Motteram, 2009), positioning themselves as novice writers. Impatient to achieve goals, the learners had developed a belief in generalisable, recipe-like test-taking strategies that seemed naïve shortcuts to success based on folk knowledge (Bailey, 1999), likely originating from unregulated online platforms. Such beliefs persisted across the project since students struggled to perceive value in idiographic WF contextualised around the given task prompts.

As an implication for classroom practitioners of IELTS Writing preparation, there appears little merit querying learners' preferences towards WF since they are unlikely to position themselves as experts. Instead, one-to-one post-feedback teacher-student conferences may be a better use of finite class time (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Hyland & Hyland, 2019). To counteract the perspective that success in IELTS Writing is contingent on the support of experts (Allen, 2016), teachers could encourage greater student autonomy through facilitating the analysis of salient features of scaffolded sample essays and the provision of mid-focused peer WF. Finally, given that a number of tenuous test-taking strategy beliefs attenuated extensive engagement with written feedback, test-takers need to develop the awareness and skills to evaluate the veracity of information they utilise to develop test-taking strategies. They should not face this challenge alone. More public information from the IELTS partners in candidates' L1 could provide support in helping them make more informed preparation choices.

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Ethics statement

Approval of the University of Exeter's Research Ethics and Governance Office was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection (Reference no. D1920-049).

Consent

All participants provided their written consent to participate in the study by digitally signing a bespoke participant information sheet.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.asw.2022.100611.

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