

WRITTEN END COMMENTS: TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

KEYWORDS

Written Feedback, Assessment in writing, Formative Assessment, Types of Feedback, Writing Skills, Effective Feedback.

DIRAN R. G. CHEDID

Department of English
Language and Literature,
Istanbul Aydin University,
Istanbul,
Turkey.

ABSTRACT

This paper previews the research about investigating the way teachers comment on their students' writings. Following Fiona Hyland's and Ken Hyland's model (2001) of analyzing teachers' comments, 50 essays that contain end comments will be examined to have an idea about the way teachers give comments. In order to have a deep insight in this teachers' way of commenting, a questionnaire will be distributed to the 50 students. Furthermore, teachers will have a questionnaire so that we can get an idea about the students' and teachers' attitudes and preferences towards commenting on writings.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers face a lot of difficulties when they correct students' papers such as: the time constraints, the number of students' essays, the number of students in class, the different parts of writing in the exam, and the marking scheme. Their purpose is to help students know about their level in general, and their weaknesses and strengths in particular. Students should read their teachers' feedback seriously in order to get benefits from the different remarks and to improve their writing skill. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) argue that in spite of the changes of the approaches to teaching writing, there is one issue that remains constant which is: "both teachers and students feel that teacher feedback on student writing is a crucial, none-negotiable aspect of writing instruction" (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005, p. 184-185). More importantly, after spending time writing the appropriate comments that suit students' essay, the later are required to read their teacher's feedback very carefully and try to learn from the identified mistakes so that they can improve their performance in the next writing.

However, some teachers notice that their students focus only on the grades and generally neglect the comments.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical studies of teacher feedback have typically represented three major categories: first, descriptive studies of what teachers actually do when responding to student writing, what the focus of this feedback is and how he comments in general. Second type of research deals with the effectiveness of teacher feedback. That is to say, it tackles the short-and long-term effects of these comments. The third type is survey of student opinions and reactions to instructor feedback (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005, p.186).

Teachers' written feedback showed significant improvement in students' English language proficiency and in writing essay structure, and as a result, students more able to write their English tasks in a better way (Cinkara & Galaly, 2018). However, numerous studies confirmed that some students are not motivated to write because they do not get proper feedback

from their teachers. Teachers' feedbacks are reported to tend to focus on form and content which makes this type of feedback general, unclear, and unhelpful (Zamel, 1985).

Types of feedback are classified based on the information provided. These types are divided into 4 categories according to Brookhart & McMillan (2020): descriptive, evaluative, effective and motivational feedback.

When it comes to the concept of descriptive feedback, John Hattie is a prominent educational researcher whose work is often referenced. Hattie does emphasize the importance of effective feedback in his research. According to his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses in his book "Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement" (2008), he found that feedback has a significant positive impact on student learning. While Hattie's work doesn't explicitly categorize feedback into descriptive feedback and other types, his research highlights the importance of providing detailed, specific, and constructive feedback to support student learning and growth.

Also, in his book "Visible Learning Feedback," Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasize the importance of feedback being specific, goal-referenced, and providing information on how to improve. They propose a feedback model that involves clarifying learning goals, assessing the gap between current and desired performance, providing feedback, and offering opportunities for students to act on the feedback received.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Having read the literature related to teacher written feedback, the authors of this study decided to conduct a small scale pilot study to see the correlation between teachers' given written feedback and their practices and the students' preferences on this feedback in a context where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The methodological tools employed in this study consist first in analyzing 50 samples of two teachers' end comments according to Hyland and Hyland's model (2001). Second, a questionnaire is administered to these two teachers and to their students to obtain a deep insight in the way of commenting through these 50 students' attitudes and preferences towards the end comments.

Table 1 Classification of the Research Participants

| Participants | Numbers |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| Teachers' questionnaire | 2 |
| Students' of Teacher A questionnaire | 25 |
| Students' of Teacher B questionnaire | 25 |
| Total students' questionnaire | 50 |
| Teachers' A students' samples | 25 |
| Teachers' B students' samples | 25 |
| Total essays samples | 50 |

Dealing with the types of teacher feedback, the research will focus on the way teachers comment on their students' essays, their focuses, and the functions used in commentary. In addition to the descriptive study of end comments, this research will also investigate students' opinions and reactions to their teachers' feedback. Indeed, these methods will be very useful to see if teachers' commentary goes in tune with students' preferences. Also, teachers' questionnaire will present whether their answers match with their practices in he comments given to their students' writing.

After the required data were collected, all scores were quantitatively analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The means for both groups were all computed. For further analysis, Frequencies were also observed.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What was very flagrant from the very beginning in teacher A's samples of end comments was the focus on suggestions. In fact, the number of suggestions was 100 and the number of criticism was only, though the total of the feedback points was 150. That is to say, 80% of

teacher A's comments were positive and only 4% were negative, whereas direct suggestion was totally obvious (70%). The use of direct suggestion revealed her tendency to provide

students with all feedback functions and to alternate between them. Below tables provide us with more detailed analysis of the end comments written by Teacher A:

Table 2 Teacher A's Feedback Functions

| | Praise | Criticism | Suggestion | Overall |
|---------------------------|----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Number of feedback points | 20 (25%) | 4 (5%) | 56 (70%) | 80 (100%) |

Table 3 Teacher A's Types of Feedback

| Types of feedback | Effective | Descriptive | Evaluative | Motivational |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|------------|--------------|
| Frequency | 70% | 15% | 5% | 10% |

On the other hand, teacher B's end comments focuses on revealing the points of weakness so that students avoid repeating them. Indeed, criticism was used by 96% of the total end comments. This correlated with what Cohen and Cavalcanti affirmed in Kroll's book second

language writing: "The comments that the teacher actually made on the essays mostly pointed out the problems rather than praise strengths." (qtd in Kroll 1990: 160). Further, zero suggestion was provided by TB unlike TA.

Table 4 Teacher B's Feedback Functions

| | Praise | Criticism | Suggestion | Overall |
|---------------------------|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Number of feedback points | 3 (4%) | 67 (96%) | 0 (0%) | 70 (100%) |

Table 5 Teacher B's Types of Feedback

| Types of feedback | Effective | Descriptive | Evaluative | Motivational |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|------------|--------------|
| Frequency | 0% | 2% | 96% | 2% |

Moving forward, TB focused on the form in his end comments as shown in table 6. In fact, a total of 100 feedback points dealt with form: 3 in praise (2%), and 130 in criticism (61%). So, the majority of TB's comments (60%) criticized the form and not the content of student's essays. On the other hand, a total of 5 feedback points was devoted to the mistakes of form representing a percentage of 19%. They were classified as follows: two feedback points praised the form (8%), while two others criticized the form (8%).

As far as the content is concerned, only two feedback points (1%) about praise dealt with the content. However, 33 points (19%) criticized

the content. They presented 35 points out of 171 that focused on the content, that is to say a percentage of 21%. In contrast, TA's samples focused on the content more than the form. Indeed, 54% of feedback points (14) dealt with the content: 6 points (23%) praise the form, 6 points (23%) criticized the content, and two suggestions were about the form of the essay. In TB's end comments, 17% of feedback points (29) had a general focus (about mistakes and English in general), whereas this type represented 27% (7 general suggestions) in TA's comments, as shown in the below table:

Table 6 The Focus of TA's End Comments

| | Form | Content | General | Total |
|------------|------|---------|---------|-------|
| Praise | 10% | 15% | 0% | 25% |
| Criticism | 2% | 3% | 0% | 5% |
| Suggestion | 7% | 36% | 27% | 70% |
| Overall | 19% | 54% | 27% | 100% |

Table 10 Focus of TB's End Comments

| | Form | Content | General | Total |
|------------|------|---------|---------|-------|
| Praise | 2% | 1% | 1% | 4% |
| Criticism | 61% | 19% | 16% | 96% |
| Suggestion | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Overall | 63% | 21% | 17% | 100% |

The students' questionnaire showed students' attitudes and preferences towards their teacher's end comments. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to compare the average scores of the questionnaire answers achieved by the first (TA's students) and second group (TB's students). The descriptive statistics for both groups are displayed in the below table, the means and standard deviations.

Table 47 Mean (Standard Deviation) for both groups (Group 1= TA's students, and Group 2= TB's students) per question

| Groups | Mean (Std. Deviation) |
|-------------|-----------------------|
| Q1 Group 1 | 4.08 (.572) |
| Q1 Group 2 | 2.44 (.821) |
| Q2 Group 1 | 1.20 (.408) |
| Q2 Group 2 | 2.16 (.554) |
| Q3 Group 1 | 3.00 (.500) |
| Q3 Group 2 | 2.36 (.810) |
| Q4 Group 1 | 1.12 (.332) |
| Q4 Group 2 | 3.04 (.539) |
| Q5 Group 1 | 4.08 (.640) |
| Q5 Group 2 | 2.12 (.526) |
| Q6 Group 1 | 2.00 (.577) |
| Q6 Group 2 | 4.64 (.638) |
| Q7 Group 1 | 1.80 (.500) |
| Q7 Group 2 | 4.04 (.455) |
| Q8 Group 1 | 3.84 (.554) |
| Q8 Group 2 | 1.84 (.625) |
| Q9 Group 1 | 1.60 (1.12) |
| Q9 Group 2 | 1.68 (.852) |
| Q10 Group 1 | 1.12 (.332) |

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| Q10 Group 2 | 1.08 (.277) |
| Q11 Group 1 | 1.80 (.408) |
| Q11 Group 2 | 1.28 (.458) |
| Q12 Group 1 | 1.92 (.277) |
| Q12 Group 2 | 1.88 (.332) |
| Q13 Group 1 | 2.84 (.473) |
| Q13 Group 2 | 2.52 (.823) |
| Q14 Group 1 | 2.84 (.554) |
| Q14 Group 2 | 2.76 (.663) |
| Q15 Group 1 | 2.56 (.821) |
| Q15 Group 2 | 1.56 (.651) |
| Q16 Group 1 | 2.20 (1.00) |
| Q16 Group 2 | 2.36 (.952) |
| Q17 Group 1 | 1.84 (.374) |
| Q17 Group 2 | 3.16 (.473) |

The findings of the research confirmed the directional hypothesis about the students' positive attitude towards their teachers end comments for group 1 (TA's students) and the correlation between teachers ways of giving comments and their students preferences, and the negative attitude of TB's students towards their teacher.

As far as the students of both teachers were concerned, the findings of the questionnaires showed that most of them considered that their teacher comments at the end of their essays were important. However, students of TB often read these comments unlike TA's students whose the majority of them were interested in reading their teacher's comments because of their importance and their usefulness. Moreover, the majority of students of TA affirmed that these annotations were helpful for understanding mistakes, and as a result they noticed improvement in their performance in the following writing, contrasting the students of TB whom they did not notice a remarkable improvement in their next essays. This shows that these comments were read carefully by TA's students and was neglected by the other group.

Concerning students' attitude towards the way of their teachers' commentary, the majority of TB'S students argue that the comments were clear and brief, which confirmed the nature of TB's samples. As far as preferences were concerned,

the majority of TB's students preferred clear and brief comments. In addition, about 72% of TB's students in the questionnaire affirmed that the teacher commented specifically on their essays, however in their samples, the teacher comments were basically on specific points. These comments do not fit the finding of TB's student's questionnaire as they preferred to comment specifically on the mistakes. More importantly, the majority of students, in general, affirmed that their teachers focused both on the form and the content in their comments. However, this did not match with the reality of TB's focused on the form in his samples. In other words, this showed that his way was not constant. It changed according to the type of mistake and the students' level. The same could be said to the use of function. Indeed, although TB focused on criticism and did not use direct suggestion at all in his samples, students showed that he used the three functions. This might be in other essays' commentary.

On the other hand, the majority of TA'S students argue that the comments were clear and long, which confirmed the nature of TA's samples. This doesn't match the student's preferences as they do prefer short comments. In addition, about 80% of TA's students in the questionnaire affirmed that the teacher commented specifically on their essays and their samples showed the same. These practices confirmed the students' preferences. In

particular, the majority of students, in general, affirmed that their teachers focused both on the form and the content in their comments. Nevertheless, this did not match with the reality of TB's focuses, as he most focus was on the content in his samples, and did not match either the students' preferences as they wanted the teacher to focus on both the form and the content. The same could be said to the use of function. Indeed, although TA focused on suggestions in his samples, 40% of the students wanted their teacher to use praise instead.

Moving to the findings of teachers' questionnaire, it was noticed that the majority of teachers agreed with the student's attitude that providing comments was important to improve their performance. Moreover, the teachers are aware of their comments that they are brief (for TB) and long (for TA). However, the expectation of TB towards his students' preferences, was not matching the students preferences as he mentioned that students care only about the mark. As for the expectation of TA regarding her students' preferences, she mentioned that students do prefer short hints, which confirms the students' preferences. Furthermore, although teachers were aware of the necessity of correcting mistakes at their major role, TA commented specifically on the essays. This correlated with the students' choices. More interestingly, both teachers claimed that they focused on both the form and the content; this was again a point of similarity between their ways and the students' preferences. However, they expected that the latter preferred the form.

Concerning the comments' functions, the teachers' perception for their students on their way in providing comments, fits what the students wanted. In fact, most of them claimed that they prefer praise showing the points of strength.

I. CONCLUSION

Teacher's B samples of end comments focus on criticism more than praise. In other words, the negative comments will be more than the positive ones. Moreover, direct suggestions is missing, and teacher only focus on revealing the points of weakness so that students avoid repeating mistakes despite mentioning in their questionnaires of the teachers that he often uses praise.

On the other hand, Teacher's A samples shows a great number of suggestion of feedback, and this matches her student's view as well as her answer in teachers' questionnaire.

The result of the students' of teacher B questionnaires indicate the importance of teachers' feedback and comments and that it is helpful however they did not notice any improvements in their next essays after reading teachers' comments, and this is because teachers did not give any suggestions or corrective feedback on their performances. Noting that both teachers do not provide oral feedback once they provide the corrected writings papers to the students. Even the students do not ask for clarification from the teacher if they do not understand their comment. As per the students' questionnaires, their focus is only on the correction of the mistakes and the marks they will take.

Hence, the results of students' of teacher A questionnaire shows that the students do notice improvements on their next writing thanks to their teacher written feedback of suggestions.

As for the teacher B, the reason of not giving suggestions to their students is because he believe that students just care about the grade and his feedbacks is neglected. Also, another main reason, is the shortage of time and pressure of the amount of papers to be corrected.

Considering the above results, the research confirmed the directional hypothesis about the gap between what EFL teachers know, and what they do in their classroom practices.

We believe this small scale pilot study helped teachers to draw their attentions on their students' preferences and adjust their comments to these choices so that students can benefit from them otherwise they will be useless. It's important for educators to be aware of their students' preferences in giving comments and to communicate clearly about their expectations for assignments. Balancing feedback on both content and form can help address the diverse needs and expectations of students, fostering a more comprehensive approach to writing instruction. Additionally, considering the cultural backgrounds and individual learning preferences of students can contribute to a more effective and inclusive teaching approach.

However, limited in its scope, the account calls for a further inquiry to examine the effectiveness of these comments on students' performance. This requires the teachers' consent to let their students write a second and a third draft in order to measure their progress in writing thanks to their teachers' written comments.

References

- Brookhart, S. M., & McMillan, J. H. (2020). Feedback and measurement. Classroom assessment and educational measurement, 9780429507533-5.
- Brooks, A., & Grundy, P. (1990). Writing for study purposes. First edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chappell, V. (2011). What makes writing so important? Retrieved December 27, 2012, from <http://www.marquette.edu/wac>.
- Cinkara, E., & Galaly, F. J. (2018). EFL Students' and Teachers' Attitudes towards Written Feedback in Writing Classes: A Case of Iraqi High-Schools. *Journal on English Language Teaching*, 8(1), 44-55.
- Cinkara, E., & Galaly, F. J. (2018). EFL Students' and Teachers' Attitudes Towards Written Feedback in Writing Classes: A Case of Iraqi High-Schools. *i-Manager's Journal on English Language Teaching*, 8(1), 44-55.
- Cohen, A. D., & Cavalcanti, M. C. (1990). Feedback on compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports. *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom*, 13(2), 155-177.
- Covill, A. (1996) Students' Revision Practices And Attitudes In Response To Surface-Related Feedback As Compared To Content Related Feedback On Their Writing. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58.(UMI NO. 9716828).
- Farrah, Z. (2012). The Impact of Three Types of Written Feedback on the Motivation and Writing Skill of English Major Students at Hebron University. London : CUP.
- Ferris, D. R. (2006). Does error feedback help student writers? New evidence on the short-and long-term effects of written error correction. *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues*, 81104.
- Ferris, D. R., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2005). *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum
- Asher, James 1996, *Learning another language through actions: the complete teacher's guidebook.*, 5th edn, Ios Gatos, Sky Oaks Productions, CA.
- Ferris, D., & Roberts, B. (2001). Error feedback in L2 writing classes: How explicit does it need to be?. *Journal of second language writing*, 10(3), 161-184.
- Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. routledge. [13]. Hattie, J. A., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77, 81–112.
- Hyland, F., & Hyland, K. (2001). Sugaring the pill: Praise and criticism in written feedback. *Journal of second language writing*, 10(3), 185-212.
- Hyland, K. & Hyland F. (2006). *Feedback in Second Language Writing: Contexts and Sources*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2006). Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing: An introduction. *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues*, 1-19.
- Karashen S. (1981). *the power of reading: Insights from Research* Second edition: West porf Hein mann.
- Keh, C. L. (1996). *Feedback In The Writing Process : A Model And Methods For Implementation*. In Hedge, T. and Whitney, N. (eds). *Power, Practice and Pedagogical*(pp. 271-282). Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kroll, B. (1990). *Second language writing* (Vol. 10). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Lee, I. (2005). Error correction in the L2 writing classroom: What do students think?. *TESL Canada Journal*, 1-16.
- Leki, I. (1986). ESL student preferences in written error correction. In Southeast Regional TESOL Conference, Atlanta, Ga., Oct. [22].
- Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign language annals*, 24(3), 203-218.
- Liu, Y. (2008). The effects of error feedback in second language writing. *The Arizona Working Papers in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching*, 15, 65-79.
- Molavi, A. (2014). The Effects of Teachers' Written Comment Types and Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes. Alzahra University, Iran University, Iran. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, Vol.11, (4), PP. 21-51.
- Williams, J., & Jasmine, G. (2003). Providing Feedback on ESL Students' Written Assignments. *TESL-EJ*, 10(4), 1-6.
- Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL quarterly*, 19(1), 79-101.