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Feedback to EFL Learners' Writing: An Investigation of Teachers and Students' Perceptions at a Saudi University

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Abstract---Teachers' feedback is the backbone of students' learning experience and one that helps them stem their errors early. At the same time, the perceptions of teachers and learners to the role of feedback in second language skills is central to developing healthy classroom practices. This is also the aim of this study which investigates the perceptions of teachers and students to feedback to writing output in an EFL environment in a Saudi University. The study sample comprises 35 students and 5 teachers at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The study uses questionnaires and supplementary interviews in a field survey to obtain the data. The findings show that both students and teachers have a positive perception to written feedback, espousing it as a fundamental instructional delivery tool in EFL pedagogy that improves learning outcomes. Moreover, the majority of the participants report that written feedback positively influences learning outcomes through correction of grammar in students' writing. Similarly, the study shows that teachers depend on different mechanisms to select the nature of feedback as well as the interest of students and curricular instructions. Finally, responses show that teachers prefer to focus on the grammar and neglect the content and ideas while giving their feedback. The study offers implications relevant to the teachers, students and educators in the field of EFL to actualize the types of feedback according to the students' real level of knowledge, not according to their preference.

Keywords---feedback, second language writing, students' perceptions, teacher feedback, writing instruction.

Introduction

The significance of feedback in second language learning cannot be overestimated. According to Lyster and Mori (2006), feedback is an essential component of any learning process and especially so in second language classrooms. In such environments, teachers see it as fundamentally instrumental, responding to students for the expected impact that it creates as a dimension of the instructional curriculum (Sheen, 2004). Feedback in second language writing has particularly been found to impact learning outcomes through distinct mechanisms that are so related that one mechanism influences the other(s) to influence the teacher-student nexus positively. According to Yoshihara (2008), when feedback is used in classes for EFL students' learning, it positively affects the relationship between the student and the teacher. Similarly, it enables the teacher to ascertain accurately the weaknesses of students, establishes trust between the two parties and in the process, and make the students feel empowered.

Empirical research materials in this discipline have emphasized the need to have a writing feedback routine as a critical monitoring and evaluation technique to ensure learners of second language achieve the desired curricular objectives. In research concerning the significance of feedback in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia, Mustafa (2012) demonstrated that the essence of a teacher's role in EFL classes is the constant scrutiny of whether pedagogical approaches meet the learner's expectations and this is made possible through L2 writing feedback that provides crucial information to students concerning their performance in writing. Despite the various studies on written feedback and its role in second or foreign language classrooms, gaps are prevalent that need to be covered. For instance, Zheng and Yu (2018) investigated the engagement of students and teachers written feedback, Storch (2018) pointed out the need for research to comprehend teacher's feedback as a social and holistic process.

In the Saudi EFL context, Al-Hazzani and Altalhab (2018) explored the impact of written feedback on the essay writing of Saudi female students. Alkhatib (2015) studied the belief of Saudi EFL instructors on the nature of feedback they provide to their students. Alshahrani, and Storch (2014) gauged the Saudi EFL teachers' application of corrective feedback according to the university guidelines. Qutob and Madini (2020) investigated the preference of Saudi EFL female learners to the types of written corrective feedback. However, all the above listed studies whether investigated the topic of feedback from teachers' perceptions (e.g., Alshahrani, and Storch, 2014) or Saudi EFL students' (e.g., Qutob & Madini, 2020). Therefore, no study according to the narrow knowledge of the researcher that investigated both teachers and students' perceptions on written feedback. Such chasm urges the researcher to explore both Saudi EFL teachers and students' perceptions on the feedback given to students' writing. Saudi EFL students enrolled in writing courses and they receive feedback on their writing on several topics required to describe, give their opinions, compare, etc. at different length starting at first year to write at the paragraph levels and transfer to write essays later on. Moreover, the present study is necessitated by research findings in the discipline to the extent that "the application of written feedback in Saudi ESL contexts is crucial and of great significance" (Grami, 2005, p. 7). This study seeks to examine the

perceptions of teachers and learners in Saudi Arabia concerning the role of feedback in second language writing. This study aims to gauge the perceptions of both Saudi EFL teachers and students on writing feedback, the impact the feedback has on Saudi EFL writing performance and the feedback mechanisms that urge the teachers to select the type of feedback while evaluating students' papers.

Literature review

The Oxford dictionary defines feedback as the process of telling someone how good or bad they are and supporting them with guidelines for improvement. There are various types of feedback. Ellis, (2009) identified the feedback which is critically based as corrective feedback. Furthermore, some researchers, (e.g., Qutob & Madini, 2020; Westmacott (2017) identified some other types of feedback like indirect, direct, surface level and, mistake coding. There are a variety of empirical studies that have examined the significance of written feedback in influencing the learning outcomes of students in Saudi Arabia and the world in general (Al-Hazzani & Altalhab, 2018; Zhang & Hyland, 2018), however, still some dimensions of written feedback need investigation. Empirical research shows that the kind of feedback, and when and how it is delivered has a positive and significant influence on the learning outcomes of students, especially those learning a second language in Saudi Universities (Al-Hazmi & Schofield, 2007). Writing feedback is perceived by teachers to influence students' learning outcomes greatly through conditioning students to adhere to linguistic accuracy and systematic error correction (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). Moreover, existing materials show that process-based writing, which we in common parlance conceive as feedback to writing, is intended to identify unique strengths and weaknesses among learners, fostering scaffolding in differentiated classrooms and revising student works to correct mistakes (Bahous *et al.*, 2011).

Additionally, researchers have established that students perceive writing feedback as a very effective pedagogical tool (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; Chong, 2018), especially when it is delivered at the intermediate stages of the feedback in the writing process since it enables learners to incorporate the corrections and insights gained from the process into their learning activities (Leki, 1992; Umer *et al.*, 2018). These studies have not only examined the perceptions of teachers and students on the efficacy of written feedback, but also concerning the manner in which the delivery of the written feedback influences the quality of instructional delivery in the second language learning classes. According to Srichanyachon (2012), written feedback in the form of requests for clarification from students by teachers, comments on grammatical concerns and margin comments provided the most effective mechanisms through which feedback influences learning outcomes. Studies examining students' perceptions concerning feedback in EFL classes have also yielded interesting outcomes (Ghosn-Chelal & Al-Chibani, 2018; Harutyunyan & Poveda, 2018; Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Tian & Li, 2018, Vattøy & Smith, 2019): Students are found to have a preference for feedback to provide them with a bearing, especially in more technical and challenging concepts of learning content as a form of pedagogical and instructional dimensions of the language learning curriculum.

Harutyunyan and Poveda (2018) analysed the perceptions of 44 EFL Ecuadorian students regarding the impact of feedback to improve their essay writing. The study reported that students who received peer feedback were benefitted and had positive perceptions on feedback. Similarly, Vattøy and Smith (2019). explored the students' perceptions on teachers' feedback as well the students' goals, self-efficacy and self-regulation. The study reported that students prefer the feedback when it connected with their extra variable related to their self-efficacy. Ghosn-Chelal and Al-Chibani (2018) probed the impact of screencasting as a feedback at remedial writing for EFL students. The findings showed that perceived screencasting positively and prefer it more than the traditional feedback they received from their teachers. According to Ferris and Roberts (2001), students often expect teachers to provide feedback as comments on their errors and often feel frustrated when no feedback is provided as they lack the much required critical bearing to direct their cognitive development.

Concerning the nature in which written feedback is provided, empirical studies have distinguished between teacher and learner perceptions concerning two types of feedback: direct and indirect. According to Srichanyachon (2012), indirect feedback is perceived as more effective by both learners and teachers on the basis of its impact on writing development especially in the long-term. On the mechanisms through which direct impact positively influences perceptions of teachers and students, Lalande (1982) established that indirect feedback makes students take the initiative of the learning process as well as develop self-criticality and, therefore, results in an intrinsic motivation that optimizes learning outcomes. Moreover, indirect written feedback is found to enable students to express their ideas more clearly due to its durable nature and facilitates the mechanisms of getting clarifications concerning all comments made by teachers (Frodesen, 2018). Miceli (2006) further established that students have a positive perception of indirect feedback for its effect in encouraging them to undertake a critical reflection of their writing and identify areas that need improvements like the “grammar areas they found particularly difficult to deal with by themselves” (p. 34). Studies on direct feedback also point out that it creates a positive perception of teachers and students, especially in instances in which students cannot implement the suggested feedback, specifically those concerning diction and sentence structure (Ferris, 2015).

To sum up, a review of the available literature shows that teachers and students have positive perceptions of written feedback, especially due to the mechanisms through which it influences the learning outcomes. More aptly, researchers have established a consensus that written feedback is positively perceived for its significant and positive impact on learning outcomes by both teachers and students, albeit with some differences concerning the mechanisms through which it positively impacts learning outcomes and the manner in which it ought to be undertaken.

Research Questions

In essence, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Saudi EFL learners perceive their teachers' feedback to writing?

2. To what extent do Saudi EFL teachers perceive the impact of feedback on their students' writing?
3. Which mechanisms that highly impact EFL Saudi teachers' selection of the type of feedback on students' L2 writing?

Methods

This study employed a mixed research design comprising both qualitative and quantitative instruments to address the research questions identified in the first section of the paper. A mixed research study design is more appropriate for a study such as this that seeks to measure human perceptions objectively because the shortcoming in validating the results will be triangulated by using the second approach (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In this study, the interview was used to consolidate the survey. This will particularly be critical to the endeavour of this study since there is a need to obtain teacher and students' perceptions and preferences concerning feedback to second language written output.

Data collection instruments

The study relied on primary data collected through the use of questionnaires and supplemented by interviews. Reliance on primary data was critical because it enables the collection of responses in a standardized manner, it can enable information collection from a large group and facilitates consultation with research assistants to minimize the problem of non-response that is inherent in field surveys as well as facilitating the use of measurement scales that enable the quantification of perceptions (Milne, 2016). The researcher developed two five-point Likert Scale based questionnaires. One is designed to gauge students' perceptions on the written feedback and the second questionnaire was aimed to explore the EFL teachers' perceptions on the impact of feedback on students' writing. Both questionnaires were validated by 4 language experts. The questionnaires were close-ended five Likert Scale which ranged from strongly agree 5 into strongly disagree 1. Furthermore, students' questionnaire contained open ended items. They scrutinized the questionnaires items in relation to the research questions. They omitted, added and suggested some modifications that participated to the development of the research tools. Moreover, the interview contained three sections. The first section measured EFL teachers of the types of feedback they preferred. It contained 6 types to select from. The second sections detected the factors that affected EFL teachers to select the type of feedback; it has 5 subsections to choose from and finally, the last section contained just 2 subsections. It measured EFL teachers whether they feedback the surface or content issue. Individual interviews were conducted telephonically, recorded with consent, and transcribed to supplement the questionnaire as a critical measure to ensure flexibility as well as the reliability and validity of responses.

Sampling

The study obtained responses from EFL teachers and students at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, of which 35 were students and 5 teachers. The students were randomly selected whereas the instructors comprised a convenience sample. All the student participants were enrolled in the writing course offered at the

university's English language and literature departments. The median age of the group fell at 21.4 years and they all shared similar background, i.e., they share the same L1, Islamic culture and even the number of years they had been studying English. All the participants were provided with consent forms containing all details regarding the study and were assured of the confidentiality of responses provided.

Data Analysis and Results

The study yielded interesting outcomes concerning the preferences and perceptions of teachers and students on feedback in EFL writing classes: Both students and teachers were found to have a positive perception towards feedback espousing it as a fundamental instructional delivery tool in EFL pedagogy that improves students' writings. Table 1 presents the average of the perceptions of students on feedback to their writing output. It shows that 62% of them very strongly agree while 20% agree on the benefits of feedback on their language learning. 71% of the respondents stated that written feedback was very essential to improve their writing. The findings also showed that students favoured direct feedback over indirect mode. Data also show that 61% of the participants valued their teachers' feedback, 51% of the students felt that feedback can assist them to rectify their grammatical and spelling mistakes. This clearly establishes that the students see their teacher's feedback as being very crucial for improving their writing.

Table 1. Students' perceptions towards teachers' feedback

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel written feedback is very essential to improve my writing.	71%	15%	4%	8%	2%
Direct feedback is more effective than indirect feedback	63%	17%	2%	7%	11%
Feedback mostly helps to correct my grammar and spelling mistakes	51%	29%	3%	10%	7%
I value written feedback from teachers	61%	20%	6%	9%	4%
Average	62%	20%	4%	9%	6%

Under the questions that were open-ended, one of the students stated, *"I think it is very difficult for you to improve your English writing if you don't receive clear feedback from your teachers"* (Student 4). One of the reasons for the students' preferences of their teacher feedback is the feeling that teachers have higher linguistic proficiency. Student (9) answered the following question *'Do you think teacher feedback is helpful?'* as: *"I think teacher feedback is very helpful because I assume that my teacher has better knowledge of grammar and word choice than me..."*. However, the students majorly mentioned that most of their teachers focus only on their grammatical errors. Student (18) said *"my teacher's main focus was only on the grammatical issues. They marked our assignments based on grammar rather than ideas"*. Additionally, receiving feedback with praise words such as "great", "good" and "excellent" were seen very effective to improve students'

writing. However, student (12) pointed out the differences among their teachers when giving written feedback.

One of the students (7) said that “general expressions are not very useful in written feedback such as ‘lots of grammatical errors’, ‘revise your work’, ‘develop your idea’ and ‘check your spellings’. They claimed that each teacher has his/her own style of checking the assignment. Students (4) said that “*every time feedback on assignments looks different from one teacher to another*”. The mechanism of giving written feedback to the students varies among teachers which negatively affect the learners’ knowledge obtained.

Table 2 presents the teachers' perceptions towards providing feedback to their students. About half of the teachers strongly agreed on the benefits of feedback to their students’ writing ability whereas 20% of them agreed about the efficacy of feedback as being an essential component of improved performance. On the contrary, a quarter of them (15%, 10%) reported with negative perception. To report the results in detail, 85% of the teachers believed that written feedback positively influences their students’ writing and 75% of them stated that they preferred providing their students with feedback to develop their writing skills. 69% of them chose the statement “Written feedback allows me to provide individualized feedback to students”. However, 35% of the teachers voiced their resentment against the time consuming task which is feedback. The teachers stated in the interview that most of them are tied up with the time constraint which may prevent them from asking students to rewrite their assignments. One of them said, “I have insufficient time to recheck my students' writings. I can give them my feedback only once.” Moreover, 12% of them use written feedback following the instructional requirements of the curriculum. During the interviews, teachers complained against the instructional guidelines received from the ministry. One of them mentioned that he “skipped giving feedback to the students, which is irrelevant to the curriculum guidelines”.

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards feedback

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Written feedback positively influences students' writing	85%	6%	2%	4%	3%
I prefer using written feedback with my students to improve their writing.	75%	10%	3%	4%	8%
I feel that feedback is highly appreciated by my students.	24%	33%	12 %	18%	13 %
Regular feedback is trusted by my students.	29%	34%	22%	6%	9%
Feedback is a time consuming process	35 %	28%	7%	16%	14%
I use written feedback just because it is an instructional requirement by the L2 curriculum	12%	15%	8%	48%	17%
Written feedback allows me to provide individualized feedback to students	69%	12%	3%	10%	6%

Average	47%	20%	8%	15%	10%
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The above cited opinions echo prior findings on the toll that feedback takes on teachers' packed schedule: Lavolette *et al.* (2015) believe that for teachers, feedback is time consuming. Table 3 below summarizes the forms of feedback that EFL teachers preferred. 39% of the teachers preferred to give feedback through comments on students' writing output, while 29% of them preferred "comments & errors", and 22% liked "Grade & comments". While preferring to focus on grade and error correction and both error correction and comments on grade was the focus of 6% and 2% of the teachers respectively.

The second part of Table 3 shows the factors that specify the types of selected feedback. 50% of the teachers selected the feedback according to their students' preferences whereas 21% of them were affected by the curriculum recommendation and, another 12% of them reported that their teaching experience impacted the types of feedback they gave to the students. Only 10% of the teachers reported that they followed the recommendations of peers while giving feedback, and 7% of the teachers considered their professional training as a main factor in giving feedback to their students' writing. Finally, the last part of Table 3 shows that 65% of the teachers preferred to provide feedback on surface issues while 35% of them showed preference to provide feedback on content and ideas.

Table 3. Mechanism and factors that determine teachers' selection of feedback

Statements	Variable	Response for (%)
1. The following forms of written feedback is the most preferable for me	a) Comments on grade	2
	b) Error correction only	2
	c) Grade & Error correction	6
	d) Grade & comments	22
	e) Comments & error	29
	f) Grade, error & comments	39
2. This is the most important factor that determines my selection of feedback for my students	a. Experience	12
	b. Curriculum recommendation	21
	c. Students' preferences	50
	d. My professional training	7
	e. Recommendation by peers	10
3. I prefer to provide	a. Surface Issues	65

feedback on	b. Content/ Ideas	35
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Discussion

The results of this research highlight the significant impact that feedback might have on the students' writing. The first research question in this study sought to explore the students' and teachers' perceptions and preferences on feedback to writing output. The results showed that the majority of the participants in the study had a positive stance with regard to feedback. This finding follows naturally because students are on their path to learning and mastering a foreign language. Such a process will not conclude happily without the teachers' correction and evaluation of their writing.

Students' preference for teachers' direct feedback is similar to many previous findings (Al-Ahdal & Alqasham, 2020; Harutyunyan & Poveda, 2018; Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Tian & Li, 2018; Zacharias, 2007). Zacharias (2007) found that her study participants preferred specific and direct comments rather than broad ones. Similarly, Ferris (2015) found that there is a preference for the direct over the indirect feedback. However, students pointed out the differences among their teachers when giving written feedback. They claimed that each teacher has his own style of checking the assignment. Similarly, Vattøy and Smith (2019) showed that the students reported positive perceptions toward self-efficacy. Students preferred the feedback to be mediated and when it is linked and diagnosed by some variables. The second research question was, "What influence can writing feedback have on students' writing performance". The majority of the students interviewed expressed a lack of excitement while getting instructor comments due to their inability to comprehend them. This carries an indication for teachers: If the students don't understand the corrections they make, it can be hard for them to improve their writing.

According to the results of the interviews, students had difficulty responding to the feedback they received because while codes aided in highlighting problematic areas of students' essays. Students in academic writing course are usually enquired to write different types of essays, like opinion, descriptive, narrative essays, etc. imitating from 3 two 5 paragraphs. However, they did not aid in the revision process. One of the participants stated that he had no idea how to enhance his writing, despite the fact that his teacher had marked various sections of his project and written "requires revision." In the same way, another student came up with the same issue when they were given an underlined sentence with the word "fragment" in front of it. Using broad comments may not be as effective with struggling students as it is with focused ones. Only the most dedicated students were able to improve their work despite their teachers' general critiques, according to the teachers' own experiences. They even corrected areas of their writing that had not been marked by the teacher. The real concern might be linked to the missing chain between what the students need and what the teacher gives. Moreover, teacher and student communication should contribute to the development of students' writing skills. Students are more concerned with their mistakes pointed out by the teacher rather than improving their own writing

skills. This finding is in line with Boud and Molloy (2012) who reported that their students could not understand the teachers' feedback.

The study reported that teachers selected the feedback according to their students' preferences and the majority of teachers focused on the grammar and neglected content and ideas which did not go down well with the students. Vattøy and Smith (2019) showed that students preferred the feedback to be anonymous as it gives honest comments and details, and students feel more secure. Teachers' preference to focus on grammatical errors show that the teachers prefer to follow the easy way out in the feedback mechanism. This finding is in line with Zaman and Azad (2012) and Zacharias (2007). They concluded that feedback on the language has a more positive impact than feedback on the content. On the contrary, Lavolette *et al.* (2015) concluded that for teachers, feedback is time consuming.

Conclusion

The study found that the majority of participant students had positive perceptions of the teachers' feedback on their writing in English. The study found that the majority of teachers agreed on the importance of feedback in developing the ability of students' writing. Moreover, teachers preferred to use grade, comments and errors on their students' writings. Furthermore, the majority of teachers gave their types of feedback according to the students' interest and some others were affected by the curriculum. The study also concluded that the majority of teachers focused on superficial errors and neglected the content and ideas.

Many new concepts and practices have emerged from research on the impact of corrective feedback on L2. The current study showed that the academic writing students received various sorts of feedback or mechanisms (immediate response; student-teacher discussion; no corrective response). The study's findings highlight certain factors that may impact student-teacher interaction. These factors include: the style of feedback provided by teachers, whether positive or negative. Researchers also found a link between student-teacher contact and academic achievement. This study's findings also suggest that students prefer a range of feedback techniques. There was a strong demand for at least two types of feedback from students. These findings show that teachers' feedback techniques need to be closely aligned with students' needs and requirements.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings the study recommends that the teachers need to better understand the difficulties encountered by students in utilizing the feedback they give on their writing output. The teachers, accordingly, need to evaluate their feedback practices as well in order to truly benefit their students. This study is a step towards assisting teachers to shape their feedback according to their students' requirements, rather than what might be assumed is required.

Limitations

Some shortcomings were encountered in the course of this study. The study depended on both the teachers and students' perceptions to report the findings. These results, however, could not be checked against the variable of gender, age, family background etc. Therefore, a further study is recommended to explore both Saudi EFL teachers and students' perceptions on written feedback across the variable of genders, and age. Furthermore, observation or analysing of teachers' feedback on students' writings will be more reliable to determine the mechanism that teachers followed while assessing their students' writings.

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