

Investigating Teacher's Feedback on EFL Students' Writing Errors and the Learners' Attitudes towards the Feedback

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• Abstract

Feedback is an important part of the learning cycle, and is, undoubtedly, an effective teaching tool in developing the EFL students' writing skill. However, both students and teachers frequently express disappointment and frustration when it comes to cope with assessment. This study aims to contribute to the literature on foreign language writing assessment by investigating the nature of teacher's feedback on EFL students' writing errors, on one hand, and exploring their attitudes towards the feedback they receive, on the other. To reach those goals, two research tools were conducted. First, 20 teachers of the English department of Adrar University were given a questionnaire to check their preferences in assessing students' writing, and, similarly, 60 students of different levels of the same department received a questionnaire to investigate their attitudes towards their teachers' feedback. Secondly, 110 students' exam papers of different modules were carefully analysed to check out the type of feedback that is frequently used. Findings show that most teachers have the tendency to use one type of feedback: Indirect Feedback. However, though they classify the writing skill as being their final priority, students express strong willingness to be involved in the process of assessment by suggesting revision to their writing after exams.

- **Key Words:** feedback – assessment – evaluation – teachers' preferences – students' attitudes.

• ملخص

يعتبر رد الفعل (أو كما يسمى أيضا بالتغذية الاسترجاعية) جزء مهم خلال مرحلة التعلم ووسيلة تدريس فعالة في تطوير مهارة الكتابة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، ولكن كل من الأساتذة والطلبة غالبا ما يشعرون بالإحباط وخيبة الأمل عندما يتعلق الأمر بتقييم العمل الكتابي. هذه الدراسة تهدف الى بحث طبيعة ردود أفعال الأساتذة أثناء تصحيح أخطاء طلبة الإنجليزية من جهة واستكشاف مواقفهم تجاه الردود التي يستقبلونها من جهة أخرى. لتحقيق هذه الأهداف أستمعنا منهجيتين في البحث، الأولى كانت القيام باستطلاعين مختلفين للأساتذة والطلبة للوقوف عند طبيعة ردود الأفعال الأكثر استعمالا في تصحيح الأعمال الكتابية والتعرف على مواقف الطلبة تجاه هذه الردود، والثانية تمحورت حول تحليل 110 أوراق لإجابات الطلبة في امتحانات عديدة ومختلفة. أظهرت النتائج أن رد الفعل غير المباشر (التغذية الاسترجاعية غير المباشرة) هو الأكثر استعمالا من طرف الأساتذة ناهيك عن رغبة الطلبة الملحة وغير المتوقعة لمراجعة وتصحيح أخطائهم في الأعمال الكتابية وخاصة في الامتحانات الرسمية.

Introduction

Feedback is an important part of the learning cycle, and is, undoubtedly, an effective teaching tool in developing the EFL students' writing skill. The teacher's feedback to students' writing is undeniably a key component and a crucial part of the process of writing. It is supposedly the guide which students follow throughout the process of writing and the means which enables them to produce a readable piece of writing. However, both students and teachers

frequently express disappointment when it comes to cope with the feedback process (Duncan, 2007 & Woodard, 2016).¹

Students very often complain that they are not given enough feedback and guidance to their written performance. Additionally, they note that the feedback, if ever occurred, is unhelpful or unclear, and sometimes demoralizing. For their part, instructors (teachers) comment that students are not interested in the feedback given to their achievement and are only concerned with grading. Even worse, teachers express frustration when students do not incorporate feedback on assessment into subsequent tasks. (Nicole & Drapper 2010).²

In addition to psychological barriers related to exams and graded assignments which can be a source of frustration, teachers' lack of concern to the usefulness of feedback may well hinder students to perform better in writing. To enhance their learning, therefore, students should be provided with an effective feedback and guidance along with the writing process. As most reliable and fruitful teaching techniques, both formative and summative assessment remain decisively focal in fostering the students' written practices.

For this reason, this paper endeavors to 1) review the crucial role of assessment in the teaching-learning process 2) investigate the nature of feedback that teachers provide in writing assignments, in general, and exams, in particular, and 3) explore the attitudes of students towards such feedback.

Additionally, this present study attempts to address these questions:

- What type of feedback do teachers use very often when assessing their students writing assignments and exams?

¹ Duncan, N. (2007). *Feed-Forward*. Improving Students' Use of Tutor Comments, 32 (3), 271-283.

² Nicol, D. & Draper, S. (2010). *Redesigning Written Feedback to Students*. Improving University Teachers Conference, July, Glasgow.

- How do students perceive assessment and what are their attitudes towards the feedback provided by their teachers in writing?
- Is the focus on feedback a good strategy that helps learners overcome their weaknesses and consequently improve their writing skills?

Our study consists of three main parts. The first part is mainly a literature review about the topic of feedback; it also clarifies three major concepts used when assessing writing: feedback, evaluation, and assessment. The second part tackles the practical side of the study. It consists of 1) two questionnaires addressed to both teachers and students to investigate the nature of the feedback provided in evaluating writing and explore the attitudes of students towards feedback, 2) analysis of 110 students' exam papers. Third, the study ends with some pedagogical implications and suggestions that may provide solid and efficient foundations to promoting students' writing skills within an EFL context.

1. The Status of the Writing Skill in Language Teaching

Compared to the other skills: speaking, reading and listening, writing is deemed the most important and sophisticated skill. So, it is a basic skill in language leaning, since the student has to make considerable effort and practise several writing activities to reach an acceptable level of writing.

It is widely argued that writing in a foreign or second language is one of the most challenging aspects in the field of teaching. Several methods and approaches have been adopted to teach this productive skill which EFL students do not master very well. Therefore, a range of foreign language teaching approaches have emerged to develop practice in writing skills. Each approach focuses on certain aspects and applies different techniques depending on the students' needs.

While some of these approaches give priority to the final piece of writing, others prioritize the process itself. Yet, all of them assert the necessity of implementing feedback along with the whole writing process as a crucial teaching technique in developing the practice of the writing skill for EFL students (Wiggins, 2012).¹ Therefore, providing feedback should not be perceived as an end per se, but rather a medium through which EFL students would be able to develop their written performances. In other words, formative assessment should gain priority at the expense of summative assessment.

2. Feedback – Assessment – Evaluation

2.1. Feedback

Feedback is essential to learning and assessment practices. It is referred to the information that is given to students about their performance. In simple words, it is any procedure used to inform the student whether a response to a given instruction is right or wrong. When providing students with effective feedback to their writing, they are consequently involved to enhance their learning. Thus, an effective feedback should contain information related to the following questions: “*Where am I going?*”; “*How am I going?*”; “*Where to next?*”.

Whilst assessment has been described as the engine driving learning, according to Brown (2007)², feedback is “...the oil that lubricates the cogs of understanding” (p. 1). “Feedback generally

¹ Wiggins, G. (2012). *Seven Keys to Effective Feedback*. Feedback for Learning. ASCD, 70(1), 10-16

² Brown, S. (2007). *Feedback & feed-forward*. [on line] Bulletin, 22, Centre for Bioscience. available from <http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/html/>

refers to the listener's or reader's response given to the learner's speech or writing" (Hattie, 2008)¹.

Feedback is therefore deemed, as argued by Hyland (2003)², an inseparable, integral, and central element in language learning in general and in learning to write in particular.

2.1.1. Feedback and Response to Students Writing

Despite the time-consuming nature of written feedback, it remains one of the most important, desirable and challenging tasks for EFL or ESL writing teachers. The way teachers structure the writing classroom and the type of feedback they give will, undoubtedly, determine how their students approach the writing process. In this sense, students are highly influenced by the decisions their teachers make in providing feedback and, therefore, learn how to revise and edit their writing.

2.1.2. Types of Feedback

There is no single way for providing feedback on writing, nor is the teacher the only source of it. Feedback, therefore, may have different types according to who gives it and how it is provided. According to Hyland (2003)³ and Harmer (2005)⁴, conferencing, peer feedback, and teacher written feedback constitute the most common feedback.

The following table sheds light on the different detailed types of corrective written feedback that teachers may use to assess the writings of their EFL students.

¹ Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta- analyses relating to achievement*. New York: Routledge.

² Hyland, K. (2003). *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press.

³ Hyland, K. (2003). *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press

⁴ Harmer, J. (2005). *How to Teach Writing*. Pearson Education Limited. (First Publication 2004).

Types of Feedback	Description
<i>Direct Feedback</i> (Explicit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher provides the student with the correct form (alternative).
<i>Indirect Feedback</i> (Implicit)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher indicates that the error exists but he/she does not provide correction.
<i>Use Error Symbols</i> (Coded Feedback)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher writes error codes (symbols) in the margin.
<i>Reformulation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher rephrases (reformulates) the student's entire text (phrase, clause, or sentence) to make the language as native like.
<i>Written Commentary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referred to as the most common corrective feedback, it is used at the end or in the margin of the student's paper.

Table2: Types of Corrective Feedback (Yussoff, 2013; Dylan, 2013; pp 15-19; and Ellis 2009; pp 98)

2.2. Assessment Vs. Evaluation

Though they seem nearly similar, assessment and evaluation are different in many levels. They are confusing terms if one doesn't have sufficient knowledge in the field of teaching and education.

While evaluation focuses on the product, assessment, on the other hand, is process-oriented; it investigates how the learning process is going on. Evaluation refers to a broader notion than assessment. Richard, J & Renandya V. (2002)¹ argue that assessment is concerned with pupils' performance, and thus provides one type of

¹ Richard, J.C. & Renandya, V.A. (2002). *Methodology in the Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

information that might be used in evaluation. The table below briefly summarizes key differences between assessment and evaluation:

Dimension of difference	Assessment	Evaluation
Content: timing	<i>Formative:</i> ongoing.	<i>Summative:</i> final.
Orientation : focus of measurement	<i>Process-oriented:</i> how learning is going.	<i>Product-oriented:</i> what's been learned.
Findings : uses thereof	<i>Diagnostic:</i> identify areas for improvement.	<i>judgmental:</i> arrive at an overall grade/score.
Primary Purpose:	to improve learning; AFL: assessment for learning.	to gauge quality AOL: assessment of learning.
What it does?	Provides feedback on performance and areas of improvement.	Determines the extent to which objectives are achieved.

3. Methodology

In an attempt to highlight the advantages of allocating official feedback sessions after each period of exams and following our aim to investigate the nature of teachers' feedback on EFL students writing errors and explore the learners' attitudes towards it, we elaborated the following study:

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted at Ahmed Draia University of Adrar. A sample of both 60 students of English and 20 teachers was randomly selected to participate in this study.

To synthesize reliable data, the students were chosen randomly from all levels (BA and MA students of Linguistics) of the University of Adrar distributed as follows:

- 13 students of first year.
- 17 students of second year.
- 10 students of third year.
- 10 students of first year MA.
- 10 students of second year MA.

Teachers, also, took part in this study by filling a questionnaire to investigate the nature of feedback they frequently provide when correcting their students' exam papers.

- 20 teachers of different subjects were given the questionnaire. (only one teacher from the whole sample has never taught written expression in his teaching career)

3.2. Materials

The present study is based on two main research tools: analysis and questionnaire. The first material endeavors to analyze 110 students' exam papers of a random selection (not only written expression, but papers of several subjects and different levels). The second material investigates the teachers' preferences in assessing their students' writing, on one side, and inspects the students' attitudes towards the feedback they receive, on the other side.

3.3. Procedure

a. Twenty (20) teachers were first given a questionnaire (only 17 questionnaires were handed back) with the intention of identifying their tendencies when they evaluate their students' written

assignments and exams. The questionnaire is also a means to obtain data about:

- ✓ The nature and type of feedback teachers provide when they correct the students' exams and written assignments.
- ✓ Their conception of the importance of feedback for EFL learners.
- ✓ The usefulness of allocating an official feedback session after exams.

b. The students' questionnaire (among 60 students, 55 students handed their questionnaires back) was directed to gauge the learners' attitudes towards feedback on writing. It's also an opportunity to gather data about:

- ✓ Their major weakness in writing.
- ✓ Their preference for the type of feedback they receive.
- ✓ The language point (vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation or content and ideas) students prefer to get considerable feedback about.

c. The exam papers chosen for the study covered nearly all the subjects afforded at the department of English with a careful focus on written expression. For the purpose of having impartial and credible results, the selection encompassed the last six academic years.

4. Results and Discussion

<i>Types of Feedback</i>	<i>Statistical Data</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Direct Feedback <i>(Explicit Feedback)</i>	49 exam papers (44,54 %)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Direct Feedback, if ever occurs, tackles “ capital letters”

<input type="checkbox"/> Indirect Feedback <i>(Implicit Feedback)</i>	92 exam papers (83,63 %)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indication of errors without providing correction
<input type="checkbox"/> Coded Feedback <i>(Use of error codes)</i>	20 exam papers (18,18%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of conventional error symbols
<input type="checkbox"/> Reformulation	No paper at all	
<input type="checkbox"/> Written commentary	37 exam papers (33,63%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 papers containing questions: why? What for? Is it necessary?
<u>Revision: Students' Response to Feedback.</u>	13 exam papers (11,81)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students were required to edit their errors.

For the purpose of eliciting information about the kind of feedback the students prefer, the pie chart below shows that **81%** of them are likely to receive feedback from the instructors (teachers) rather than their peers. Their willingness to get feedback from teachers is a clear indicator to allocate remedial sessions for corrective feedback.

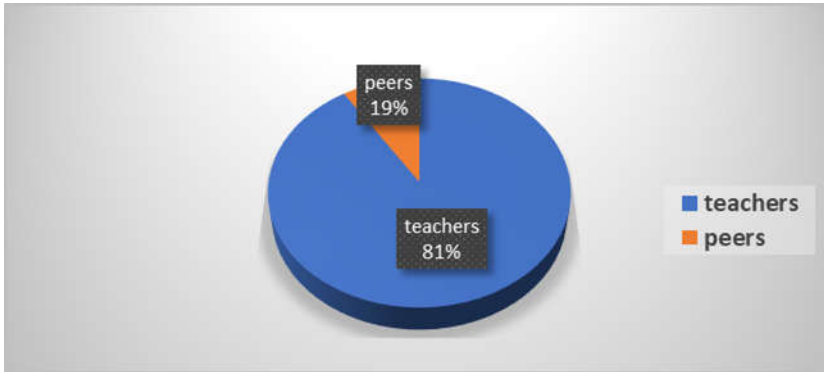


Figure1. Student Preference for Feedback.

Furthermore, to explore whether feedback is effective and beneficial to improve the students' writing skill, **88%** of the teachers assert that providing an appropriate feedback would intensively promote student's skills in written performances. Unexpectedly therefore, only two teachers (**11,86%** of the sample) say they provide a special session to assess and evaluate the students' performance in writing. However, how to provide such feedback is open to debate.

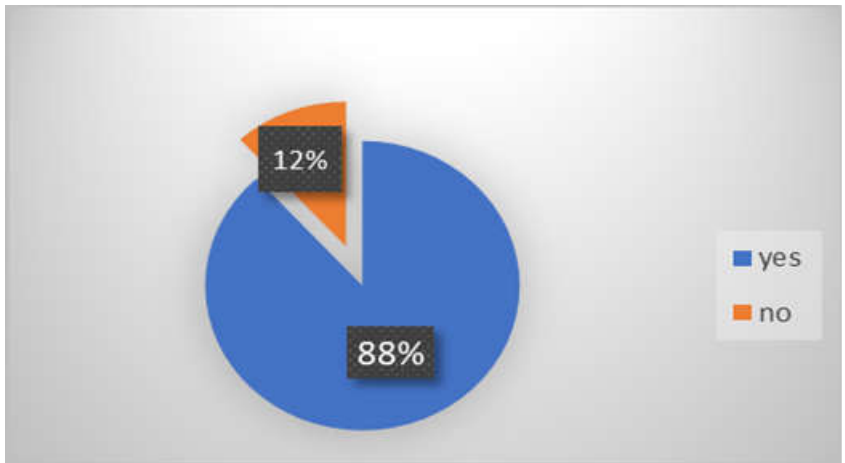


Figure2. Is Feedback on Writing Effective?

On the other hand, though more than half of teachers as well as the students claim they don't have a certain preference to the types of feedback, the pie chart shows that **92** exam papers (**83,63%**) were provided with an indirect feedback (*implicit feedback*). The emphasis on capital letters when providing direct feedback (explicit feedback) is one of the teachers' main concern. capitalization is highlighted in **44,54%** of the exam papers; a percentage that questionably opens doors for further studies and researches concerning the writing skill.

Unsurprisingly, no teacher at all reformulates (rephrases) the student's answer as to back the student up to use accurate alternatives in his or her writing; they view reformulating as inappropriate for students at this academic level. Additionally, because of the overcrowded classes they have in charge, teachers postulate the time-consuming nature of this type of feedback. Teachers left **37** written commentaries on students' exam papers which represent the third of the sample (**33.63**); most of them were questions such as: *Why? What for? Is it necessary?...* ; those unanswered questions make the devotion of specific sessions of formative assessment after exams inevitable though the majority of the teachers believe that it will be a time consuming procedure too.

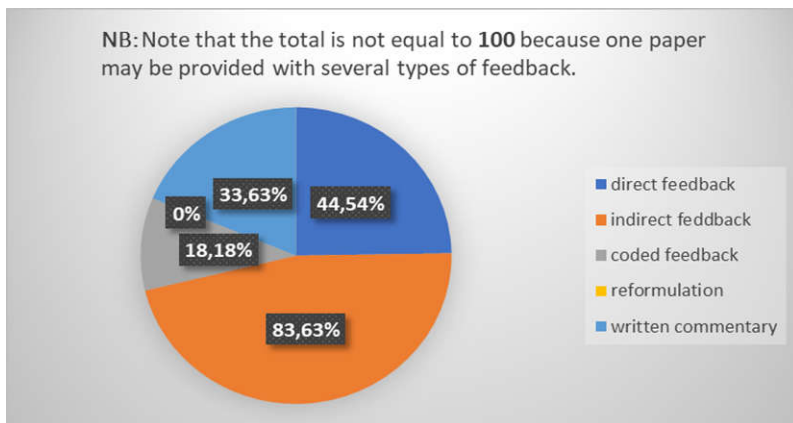


Figure3. Types of Feedback Used by Teachers.

There is no doubt that the reading skill is focal in shaping the student's learning. Unexpectedly, the obtained results show that fourteen (14) teachers with a percentage of 72% ignore the strategy of practising writing as a tool of enhancement and advise students to give much importance to reading if they want to improve their writing. One teacher (06%) thinks that by editing their peers' written assignments students may improve their writing.



Figure4. Strategies to Improve Writing.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Evidently, the results have revealed that the students of the English Department at the University Ahmed Draia in Adrar have positive attitude towards the feedback given to their written performance. By excluding peer feedback, EFL students assume that

teachers remain the crucial factor in assessing the learners' writing and believe that with the different types of feedback their teachers would provide, the gap between their needs and their teachers preferences in providing feedback would eventually be bridged.

Additionally, the study emphasizes that feedback cannot be rigidly based on any standardized practice derived from the opinions of teachers alone, but must be flexible enough to incorporate the attitudes and needs of the students as well. Thereby, the contribution of the EFL learners in the whole process of assessing their written work is, by no means, an ultimate goal to promote the writing skill.

Furthermore, because feedback to writing assignments is time consuming in nature, teachers remain reluctant to provide efficient feedback to their students. Moreover, to assign official and regular sessions for formative assessment after exams requires top down decisions.

The participants of this study (instructors and students) have suggested a number of pedagogical implications and possible solutions to enhance the EFL learner's confidence in writing. The suggestions are summarized as follows:

- Providing students with different types of feedback and varying the assessment techniques would undoubtedly enable them to acquire good practices of writing.

- Teachers should allocate specific session of feedback to permit their learners stand by their weak and strong points and, therefore, be provided with accurate backups to improve their writing.
- EFL students are requested to make intensive reading if they wish to better their writing.
- Students should be given sufficient time to respond to the feedback they receive. Hence, they are invited to revise and edit their errors.

As has been noted, the present study was undertaken to investigate the nature of teachers' feedback on EFL students' writing errors, on one hand, and explore learners' attitudes towards the feedback they receive, on the other.

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