

Students' Attitudes towards the Utility of Conferencing Feedback in Writing: Students Perception

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ABSTRACT:

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Teacher-student writing conferences are individual conversations about the students' writing or writing process. This study aims to investigate and shed some light on first-year students' attitudes towards writing conferencing in EFL writing productions. It attempts to demonstrate that conferencing with students can help them improve their writing abilities. To this end, data was collected through a perception questionnaire that was handed to a randomly selected sample of 15 first-year students at the department of English in the Ecole Normale Supérieure -Assia Djebbar- de Constantine. The data analyses were descriptive. Results demonstrated that the writing conference is an effective technique to improve students' writing.

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Introduction

According to Holt (1992), the possible ways through which students would learn to write are through the teacher's feedback. Indeed, the type of technique used to correct students' errors that proved effective in previous studies has always been the teacher's written corrective feedback (Taddarth, 2019). Teachers' written feedback does not provide space for meaning negotiation; if the teacher's feedback is unclear or misunderstood, the student does not have the opportunity to ask for clarification. More concisely, several studies have focused specifically on the ways that meaning is negotiated in conferences (Williams 2002, 2004; Weissberg 2004). Furthermore, writing personalized feedback to every student is time-consuming for the teacher (Goldstein, 2005). In such a context, the teacher's conferencing technique is another way of providing feedback to students.

Before this investigation, the participants enrolled in conferencing feedback training for five weeks during which they received written feedback as well as conferencing feedback on their writing paragraphs. As students manifested significant gains in writing skills (content, organization of ideas, word choice, and mechanics) which was not the case of their peers who were receiving written feedback only, the researcher was stimulated to evaluate this promoting feedback technique. By getting through the participants' experience during the training to explore their attitude toward this innovative learning method, one could make decisions about the possibility to introduce conferencing feedback in teaching writing. To reach this target, the following research questions are posited:

- What are the students' attitudes towards writing conferencing and course objectives?
- What is the students' attitude towards the gained skills by the end of the training?
- What is the students' attitude towards the teacher's role in writing conferencing?
- What is students' intention and preference as future teachers as far as teaching writing is concerned?

1. Literature Review

1.1. Definition of writing

Some researchers and scholars provided various definitions of writing. According to Harmer (2006), "writing is a basic language skill, as important as speaking, listening, and reading" (pp.79-80). Dorothy and Carlos (2005) gave a broader definition. From their perspective, writing is an important form of communication in day-to-day life, but it is more important in high school and

college where students find it difficult to include ideas in both their first and second language, and each culture has its style of academic writing. In addition to the importance of writing, Harris and Graham (2016) also stated that writing, like reading, is a foundational skill that can boost comprehension and achievement across all subject areas (p. 78). Moreover, Gie (2002) stated that “writing is a whole series of activities done by someone to express his or her thoughts (experiences, opinions, knowledge, desires, feelings, and so on) through written language to be read and understood by others” (p.3). Besides, writing is the production of graphic symbols to form words in a sequence of sentences arranged in a particular order and linked together in certain ways. Also writing is a process of encoding a message to transfer meaning to the reader (Byrne 1980, p.14). To conclude, Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014) stressed the significance of writing, teaching writing, and learning to write as follows:

Writing is a powerful means of communication by which students learn better to express themselves. Teaching and learning to write in any language is an essential area that influences students' performances and language learning. Moreover, learning to write in English as a foreign language has been an essential professional educational issue that serves various educational purposes and meets certain learning needs upon which the foreign language learners' progress depends. (Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2014, p. 248).

1.2. Conferencing Feedback

1.2.1. Definition of Writing Conferences

Teacher-student writing conferences are individual, one-on-one teacher-student conversations about the student's writing or writing process. According to Tompkins (1990), “As students write, teachers often hold short, informal conferences to talk with them about their writing or to help them solve a problem related to their writing” (p. 370). A similar definition has been adopted by Sperling (1991, p. 132). For this scholar, teacher-student writing conferences are private conversations between teacher and student about the student's writing or writing processes. Over the past few decades, writing conferences were explored under different names regarding their multiple functions including assisted performance (Vygotsky, 1978); response sessions (Hansen, 1987); face-to-face interaction (Reigstad & McAndrew, 1984); professional discussion between writers (Murray, 1985); one-to-one teaching (Calkins, 1986); one-to-one interaction (Sperling, 1991; North, 1995); interactive dialogues (Wong, 1997); and meaningful contact (Lerner, 2005).

1.2.2. Characteristics of Effective Writing Conferences

To reach the positive outcomes stated previously, writing conferences should be carefully planned and conducted based on the following characteristics of effective writing conferences: conferences should be predictable so that students become familiar with the procedures that make them helpful for the teacher to save time (Anderson, 2000). Besides, teachers must focus on one or two major concerns in students' texts during a single conference (Boynton, 2003; Sandman, 2006; Lain, 2007). Another characteristic of an effective conference is to provide solutions for student writers by telling them what to do and what to write (Graves, 1982, 1983; Atwell, 1987, 1998; Lain, 2007). Additionally, students should be encouraged to ask questions and provide solutions, so both teachers and students should talk during the conferences (Calkins, 1986; Lerner, 2005; Athanasourelis, 2006). At last, humor is a very important feature when conducting conferences to reduce stress and tension (Graves, 1982, 1983). Sullivan (1992) believed the bottom line is that utilizing humor to reduce stress makes school a more enjoyable experience for both teachers and students.

1.2.3 Advantages of Conferencing

Conferencing has many advantages in writing and the learning experience at large. Conferencing provides opportunities for students to clarify teachers' written feedback on their writing, and those written comments need to be negotiated in face-to-face conversations (Zamel, 1985). Students have the chance to negotiate the meaning for clarification and to achieve a better conference benefit and outcome (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Shvidko, 2016). Moreover, Goldstein and Conrad (1990) stated that successful revisions emerged in consecutive drafts when revisions had been discussed with the teachers individually. The ways that feedback is delivered through the dialogue between teacher and student can enable the student writer to develop both his or her text and writing abilities (Williams, 2002). Several studies reported that conferences contribute significantly to improving students' writing ability and motivation toward learning (Bell, 2002; Koshik, 2002; Eickholdt, 2004). They also purportedly contribute to student confidence (Harris, 1995a; Martinez, 2001); independence (Murray, 1979; Calkins, 1985; Harris, 1995a; McIver & Wolf, 1999; Martinez, 2001); and empowerment (Young & Miller, 2004). In addition, writing conferences increase students' critical thinking skills and their learning by providing a social environment for teachers to help learners become independent writers (Flynn & King, 1993). Several studies concluded that conferences help students experience the feeling of authority and ownership (Steward, 1991; Martinez, 2001).

1.3. Definition of Attitudes

Ellis(1994) stated that the study of the learners' attitudes and motivation toward learning English is the best way to properly understand the learning process. Accordingly, Karahan (2007) affirmed, "positive language attitudes let learners have a positive orientation towards learning English" (p.84). Chamber (1999) asserted that learning occurs more easily when the learner has a positive attitude towards the language and learning, and Gardner (1985) claimed that attitude is an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred based on the individual's beliefs or opinion about the referent. So, for him, attitude is a sum of man's beliefs, feelings, prejudice or bias, perceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic.

Gardner considered the concept of attitude as a component of motivation which refers to the combination of effort, desire, and favorable attitudes towards learning the language. In related developments, Wenden (1991) suggested that the term attitude includes three components: cognitive which is beliefs, ideas, and opinions; affect which is feelings and emotions, and behavioral which is one's consisting of actions or behavioral intentions towards the object. From a different angle, Van Ells et al. (1984) proposed that it does not have any problem whether all or only one of the three components are measured; the relationship between the components is so close that sufficient information on an attitude can be obtained by measuring one component, no matter which. Learner attitudes have an impact on the level of language proficiency achieved by individual learners. Thus, learners with positive attitudes will experience success. Similarly, learners with negative attitudes will not experience success but rather failure (Ellis, 1994).

2. Methodology

2.1. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the Department of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Constantine during the academic year 2020/2021. Random sampling was adopted to select the participants of the study. In this type of sampling, each member of the represented population was equally likely to be chosen as part of the sample. 15 first-year undergraduate students voluntarily participated in the study. They have been receiving conferencing feedback for five weeks when they have been writing five expository paragraphs during the subject of writing. Each time they finished writing one paragraph, the teacher corrected their writing, wrote comments on the papers, and then conferred with each individual separately at the teacher's office.

2.2. Tools of Investigation

In this study, a survey methodology was used because of its overriding advantages in obtaining quantitative data through a wide range of forced-choice responses which were at a 100% rate. Accordingly, a questionnaire, which aimed at gathering information about students' reactions and attitudes towards the effectiveness of the conferencing feedback, was developed and used due to its effectiveness in gathering data from a group of people in a short time as well as its easiness to be prepared, and quickness to be administered (Dörnyei, 2003).

This questionnaire consists of 24 questions in four different sections thereby respondents were requested to circle a number, from 1 to 5 to express their degree of agreement or disagreement. In addition, they were provided with a space to add more information or to answer open questions. The first section consists of six items on participants' reactions to writing conferences and the course objective. The second section is made of five other questions about informants' attitudes to the gained skills by the end of the training. The third section comprises nine questions about strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in the conferencing training. The final section consists of informants' additional needs and interests because of the gained skills. It also includes an introductory explanation about the purpose of the study, and a part to thank the participants for their contribution to the study. For all parts, students seemed to have no trouble understanding and responding to the sections of the questionnaire. It was also given to an English teacher to elicit her views as to the correctness, clarity, and appropriateness of the instrument. Thus, it was reviewed and corrected according to her recommendations.

2.3. Data collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the participants of the experimental group just a week after training since they received teacher conferencing feedback. Some general explanations were given to the students about the questions and how to fill out the questionnaire which was administered in English. They were informed that the data provided were going to be kept confidential, and that their anonymity would be respected. Participants filled out the questionnaires during normal classroom time. They spent about 30 minutes on average to complete it.

3. Data Analysis and Results Interpretation

The results of the study are categorized into five major headings turning around 1) participants' reaction to conferencing and the course objective, 2) informants' attitudes to the gained skills by the end of the training, 3) strengths,

weaknesses, and areas of improvement in the conferencing training, 4) informants' attitudes towards the role of the teacher, and 5) informants additional educational needs and interest.

3.1. Participants' Reaction to Conferencing Feedback and the Course Objective

When asked to express their reaction to the course objectives, and whether conferencing technique objectives were clearly defined before the beginning of the study, all the informants (100%) expressed a positive attitude. This indicates that the teacher was able to state the objectives of the training straight from the beginning. One of the most important aims of conferencing is to ask for clarification when the comment of the teacher is not clear; this is what has been certificated by 60% of the informants who strongly agreed and 40% who agreed that conferencing with their teacher allowed them to ask for clarification when written feedback is not clear. Furthermore, there was a general agreement among 100% of the participants that conferencing with the teacher helped them improve the content, organization of ideas, and sentence structure; whereas, errors in grammar and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) were treated in written feedback. 93.33% of the participants were aware that in conferencing, the teacher paid attention to big aspects of language rather than small ones.

Table 1. Students' perception of Conferencing Feedback and Course Objectives

Item	Levels of satisfaction					total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1 Objective of Conferencing	0%	0%	0%	53,33%	46,66%	100%
2 Asking for clarification	0%	0%	0%	40%	60%	100%
3 areas of Conferencing	0%	0%	0%	20%	80%	100%
4 areas of written feedback	0%	0%	6,66%	33,33%	60%	100%
5 Motivation of face-to-face feedback	0%	0%	0%	6,66%	93,33%	100%
6 Conferencing is the best way to learn to write	0%	0%	0%	46,66%	53,33%	100%

Most of the participants 93.33% strongly agreed that a teacher's face-to-face feedback motivates them to write more and more. Additionally, 46.66% agreed and 53.33% strongly agreed that conferencing with the teacher once their writing is finished is the best way to learn to write in English; none of the informants expressed a negative attitude, as noticed in table 1, so all the informants were positively satisfied. This indicates that learners appreciate conferencing feedback

given by their teacher once they finish writing so that their composition will be corrected, and the teacher’s comments would be well accepted.

3.2. Informants’ attitudes to the gained skills by the end of the training

After checking the informants’ reaction towards the conferencing feedback, which was judged satisfactory, investigating their attitude towards the gained skills after training is found in their responses to questions (7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). When analyzing the results, we can see that a noticeable number of informants (86.66%) expressed a total agreement that this training developed their ability to write correctly which was manifested via their ability to write with fewer mistakes, their ability to organize ideas in a paragraph (93.32%), their ability to write a paragraph with well-structured sentences (86.66%), their ability to write a paragraph carrying about word choice (100%), and their ability to write well-formatted paragraphs (100%).

To sum up, these results, which we deduce from table 2, confirm that there was a dominance of the positive attitude in the informants’ feedback towards the different gains they developed during the conferencing training.

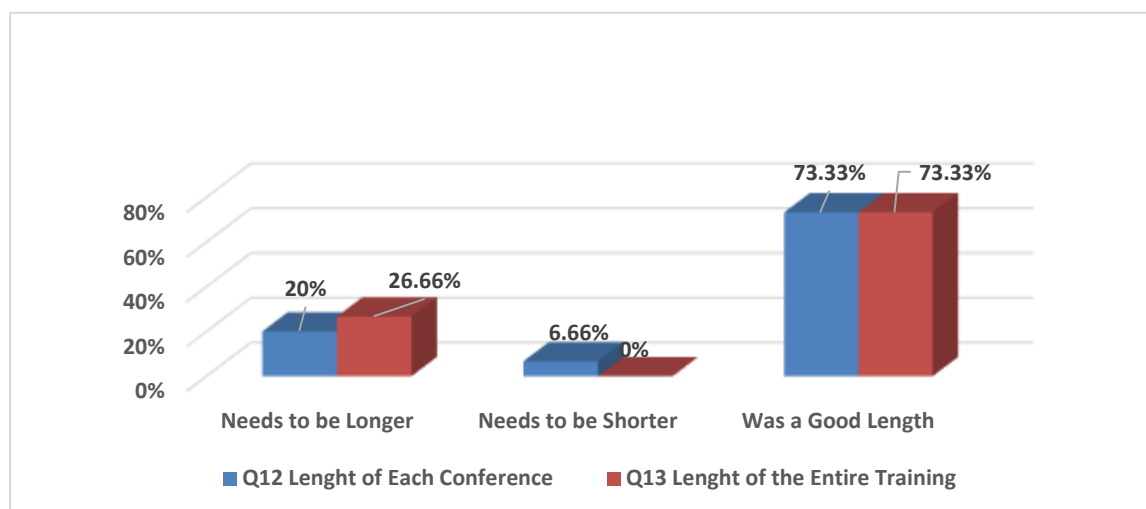
Table 2. Students gained skills by the end of the training

Items	Levels of Satisfaction					total
	1	2	3	4	5	
7 The ability to write with fewer mistakes	0%	0%	13,33%	53,33%	33,33%	100%
8 The ability to organize ideas in a paragraph	0%	0%	6,66%	66,66%	26,66%	100%
9 The ability to write a paragraph with well-structured sentences	0%	0%	13,33%	66,66%	20%	100%
10 The ability to write a paragraph carrying about word choice	0%	0%	0%	46,66%	53,33%	100%
11 The ability to write a well-formatted paragraph	0%	0%	0%	73,33%	26,66%	100%

3.3. Strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvement in the conferencing technique

In their response to questions (12 and 13), a high percentage of the informants (73.33%) saw that five to ten minutes was a good length of conferencing; surprisingly, the same percentage (73.33%) affirmed that the length of the training (five weeks) was also good. On the other hand, 20% of them certified that the length of the conference needed to be longer; and 26.66% admitted that the 5 weeks were not enough, so the training needs to be longer. However, 6.66% maintained that the length of the conferencing required to be shorter.

Figure1. Informants' opinions about the length of the training and the session



4.4. Informants' Attitudes towards the Role of the Teacher

Table 3. Informants' Impression of the Role of the Instructor

Item	levels of satisfaction					total
	1	2	3	4	5	
14 the topics covered during the training were motivating and interesting	0%	0%	6,66%	26,66%	66,66%	100%
15 good interactions with the teacher	0%	0%	0%	53,33%	46,66%	100%
16 Relaxing Atmosphere	0%	0%	6,66%	53,33%	40%	100%
17 considering all the teacher's comments	0%	0%	0%	33,33%	66,66%	100%
18 written comments before conferencing	0%	0%	0%	60%	40%	100%
19 the agenda of the conference	0%	0%	0%	53,33%	46,66%	100%

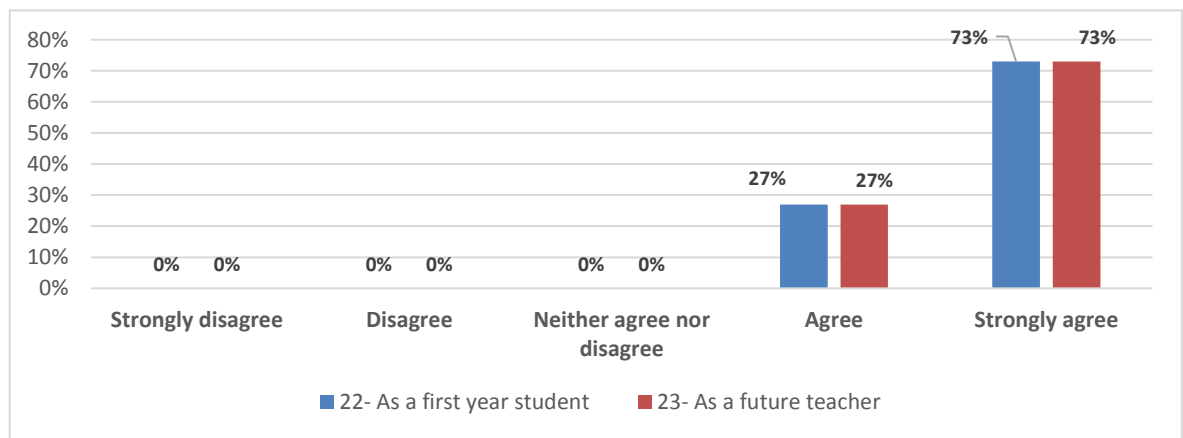
When referring to the topics covered during the training, the data in Table 3 reveals that except for one student who was nonaligned; the others (93.32%) expressed their gratification. For the latter, all the topics covered during the 5 weeks were interesting, motivating, and enjoyable. They supported this attitude by a set of reasons such as the choice of topics which were taken from actual life, and most of them were suggested by the participants themselves. As far as the role of the teacher is concerned, all the informants (100%) agreed that they had good interaction with their teacher while conferencing. When asked to justify their choice, except for three of them who did not give any justification, the majority expressed satisfaction and pleasure. This finding is backed by an almost similar percentage of the population (93.33%) who asserted that conferencing provides an informal and friendly atmosphere. Consequently, 33.33% of the informants

agreed that their teacher’s comments are all taken into consideration when writing again another paragraph. 66.66% of them strongly agree also, so the students were paying attention to their teacher’s feedback during the writing conferences. As reported in table 3, the teacher had put comments on the participants’ paragraphs before holding conferences with them, and these comments had in effect set the agenda of the conferences, which has been supported by 100% of the participants.

In the 20th question, the informants were asked about what they liked most in conferencing. 33.33% of the participants liked the interaction with their teacher. Similarly, 33.33% of them liked the conversation about the mistakes they did elaborate in a friendly atmosphere. One student liked the praise and good comments of the teacher. Another one found conferencing feedback very motivating to learn academic writing. Two others liked this technique simply because it was something new in the learning process.

By contrast, in question 21, the informants were asked about what they disliked most in conferencing. 66.66% of the participants agreed that nothing was pleasant in conferencing; the participants liked everything concerning the training, except two of them who asserted, “finding each time the same remarks and comments by the teacher was embarrassing”. “Waiting for my turn”, another one added.

Figure2. Informants’ Future Intention toward Conferencing Technique



Because of the numerous benefits they gained during this training, the informants recommended conferencing feedback for first-year students. In their response to question 22, 100% of the informants expressed their agreement that all first-year students should benefit from conferencing training. They argued that first-year students are beginners and must know the basics of effective writing and learn from their mistakes to improve their writing.

Similarly, all of the participants (100%) agreed that conferencing will be of value to them as future teachers. They affirmed that as future teachers they need

to know how to write correctly and how to teach their pupils how to write also correctly, so they can use the same technique when teaching writing in the future. Informants affirmed that conferencing is beneficial in teaching writing, so sure, they would use it when teaching writing in the future to improve their pupils' writing.

4.5 Informants' Additional Educational Needs and Interests

When asked to provide additional feedback concerning conferencing needs and interests, the informants affirmed that it was a good experience; although, it should be generalized to all members of the group, if not to all first-year students. They also stated that this new technique of providing feedback was beneficial, for it enables them to improve their writing skills as well as to raise their awareness of writing problems and weaknesses they usually encounter as EFL writers.

4. Discussion

Focusing on students' experiences, the research findings suggest that the integration of conferencing feedback in teaching writing is of great utility for first-year students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Constantine. The participants realized that conferencing feedback satisfies their learning needs; accordingly, they wished to have more and more face-to-face feedback in the future. Students' positive attitude towards conferencing correlates with the existing literature. Several studies purport that writing conferences make students better writers and improve their habits and attitudes toward learning and revision skills (Bell, 2002; Koshik, 2002; Eickholdt, 2004) because students learn more in conferences than they learn through traditional methods (Mabrito, 2006). Moreover, conferencing feedback provides opportunities for students to clarify teachers' written feedback on their writing (Zamel, 1985). In another research, students value oral feedback provided in face-to-face conferencing (McLaughlin, 2012)

Students received written feedback on their compositions. Written feedback involves all aspects of language with a focus on grammar mistakes and mechanics (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation). Then the teacher set the agenda of the conference, in which she decided on the major concerns that would be the focus of the conference, namely aspects of content, organization of ideas, sentence structure, and word choice. As Weigle (2014) stated, "prioritizing errors that interfere with comprehension, errors that are stigmatized, errors that are the current focus of instruction, and errors that occur frequently" (p. 12). In the same context, Leung (2008), Ongphet (2013), and Perez-Amurao (2014) argued that conferencing enhances the students' participation, and this allows the teacher to realize exactly what the student understands, and what he/she does not understand.

Thus, focusing heavily on the accuracy of texts deprives writing of its communicative function and turns a writing class into a grammar class. The improvement of students' writing skills could be detected in the students' ability in improving the content of the composition and improving the form of the language based on the teacher's feedback.

In writing workshop classrooms, exceptionally, during the pandemic period of Covid 19, students had 3 hours of writing instruction once a week. During this session, students had lessons of one hour, 45 minutes for individual writing time, and from five to ten minutes for individual writing conferences. During these individual writing conferences, the teacher and the student had a conversation, in which they revised together student's writing. Sobhani and Tayebipous (2015) argued that the dialogue between the student and the teacher helps each to learn something from the other. The student may ask for clarification if the written feedback is not clear, and the teacher must respond to the student, evaluate, and suggest possible revisions and writing strategies. At the same time, the teacher has to provide a friendly atmosphere to encourage the student to take the initiative, to self-evaluate, and make decisions. Even when weaknesses are pointed out in a conference, comments tend to be less harsh, and more humanized, when extended in a conversation between people rather than transmitted in red on paper (Kollman, 1975, p.15). Furthermore, Razali and Jupri (2014) suggested that a combination of praise, criticism, and recommendations may be most beneficial. In conclusion, written, and face-to-face feedback in a non-threatening atmosphere helped students to improve their writing skills.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to determine first-year students' attitudes towards writing conferences at the Ecole Normal Supérieure of Constantine. The findings have illustrated the use of conferencing as an effective form of feedback that supports students' writing processes. It has been asserted that conferencing feedback satisfies students' learning needs, for it enables them to develop their ability to improve the content, organization of ideas, and sentence structure; whereas, errors in grammar and mechanics should be treated in written feedback. Students have also affirmed that conferencing is so beneficial in learning that all students at their school should benefit from that training, and they recommended this technique to be used in teaching writing in the future as a way to improve their pupils' writing.

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Appendix: Post Training Evaluation Questionnaire

This questionnaire has the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the conferencing technique in writing you have been experienced during your face to face sessions. As well as having knowledge of the preferences of the students. Read the questions carefully and answer the most sincerely possible. You do not need to write your name.

For each of the bellow listed statements circle the number which best reflects your views on a scale of 1 to 5.

- 1= strongly disagree,or the lowest, most negative impression.
- 2= Disagree, negative impression.
- 3= Neither agree nor disagree, or an adequate impression.
- 4= Agree,positive impression
- 5= Strongly agree, or the highest, most positive impression

1. The objectives of the conferencing technique were clearly defined.1 2 3 4 5

If you have scored 3, 2 or 1, please comment why you have given this rating

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2. Conferring with my teacher gave me the opportunity to ask for clarification if the written feedback is not clear. 1 2 3 4 5

If you have scored 3, 2 or 1, please comment why you have given this rating

-
3. Conferring with my teacher helped me to improve content, organization of ideas and sentence structure. 1 2 3 4 5
 4. Errors of mechanics (spelling, punctuation and capitalization) are corrected in written feedback. 1 2 3 4 5
 5. My teacher's face to face feedback motivates me to write more and more 1 2 3 4 5

If you have scored 3, 2 or 1, please comment why you have given this rating

-
6. I think the best way to learn to write in English is that your teacher confers with you once your writing is finished 1 2 3 4 5

If you have scored 3, 2 or 1, please comment why you have given this rating

-
7. I now can write a paragraph correctly with fewer mistakes.1 2 3 4 5
 8. I now can well organize my ideas in a paragraph 1 2 3 4 5
 9. I now can write a paragraph formed of well structured sentences.1 2 3 4 5
 10. I now can write a paragraph caring about word choice 1 2 3 4 5
 11. I now can write a correctly formatted paragraph 1 2 3 4 5
 12. How was the length of each conference (from 5 to 10 minutes)

- a) Needs to belonger
- b) Needs to be shorter
- c) Was a good length

13. How was the length of the entire training (5 weeks)

- a) Needs to belonger
- b) Needs to be shorter
- c) Was a good length

14. The topics covered during the five weeks were motivating and interesting 1 2 3 4 5

Please make any comments by stating clearly why you give the above rating

-
15. I had good interaction with the teacher. 1 2 3 4 5

Please make any comments by stating clearly why you give the above rating

-
16. I think the atmosphere was relaxing. 1 2 3 4 5

Please make any comments by stating clearly why you give the above rating

-
17. When my teacher gave me his opinion in writing, I take into account all his comments. 1 2 3 4 5

If you have scored 3, 2 or 1, please comment why you have given this rating

-
18. The teacher had put comments on our paragraphs before holding conferences with us. 1 2 3 4 5

19. The teacher's written comments had in effect set the agenda of the conference. 1 2 3 4 5

20. What did you like most about the conferencing in writing?

Students' Attitudes towards the Utility of Conferencing Feedback in Writing: Students Perception

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21. What did you dislike most about the conferencing in writing?

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22. This conferencing training will be of a value to me as a future teacher 1 2 3 4 5
Please make any comments by stating clearly why you give the above rating

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23. I fully recommend the teacher student conferencing for first year students. 1 2 3 4 5

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24. Please provide any additional feedback about the conferencing in writing?

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