EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Role of Teachers' Feedback in their Writing Proficiency

The case of 1st Year Students of English at Mila University Centre

تصورات طلاب الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في دور توجيهات الأساتذة في مهاراتهم الكتابية

دراسة عينة من طلبة السنة الأولى انجليزية المركز الجامعي /ميلة

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Abstract:

  The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of 1st year EFL students about the role of teachers' feedback in their writing competency. The method is descriptive where a questionnaire is used in collecting data. The results for this research inquiry show that students were genuinely interested in their teachers' feedback because it generally leads to positive effect on their texts, motivate them, and give them insights into their challenges and their progresses. Nonetheless, the students claimed that they sometimes find difficulties in understanding the teachers' feedback either because the teachers' writing is illegible, students are unable to understand the feedback codes, or students misinterpret the margin comments on their drafts. This study supported the teachers' feedback as long as it includes comprehensive input with clear cods, and readable comments.

Keywords: *students' perceptions, teachers' feedback, students' writing, writing proficiency, EFL writing class.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that in learning a new language, learners should focus on developing the four skills of the target language. Writing is one of these skills that has recently received a lot of attention from learners, teachers, researchers, and syllabus designers. Writing is the key to successful learning and a powerful mode of communication that helps students learn how to construct and organize their thoughts. One of the highly valuable tools that teachers should have to help students grow as writers is feedback, which is a vital element of the writing process. Different researchers (e.g., Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris 2003; Harmer, 2001; Hyland 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006, and Leki 1990) argue that feedback is a crucial aspect of the writing process and that it plays a central role in learning this skill. As well, feedback is a powerful motivational factor that helps students write multiple drafts and revise their writing several times in order to produce a much improved piece of writing. Teachers, however, must know how and when to give feedback, and the type of feedback that really helps in enhancing the learners' writing proficiency.

2.The Writing Skill:

Writing is a basic skill in language teaching/learning since it is critical for ensuring academic success. That is, our academic career development is a process that is highly influenced by our writing.

" Effective writing, an essential aspect of student learning outcome in higher education, is viewed as an important intellectual skill and is essential for academic and career success" (Hasegawa 2013; Lee 2013; Lee et al.2014a,b; Sparks et al.2014 In Lee et al. 2016, P. 327). In addition, Douglas (2004) argued that writing was a convention for recording speech and for reinforcing grammatical and lexical features of the language. Now, we understand that writing is a unique skill with its own features and convention, and the ability to write has become an indispensible skill in the field of any language, even in our own native language.

Learning to write is usually one of the most difficult and challenging tasks because writing is a creative work that requires imagination, intelligence, perseverance, and talent. In this concern, Philippakos & MacArthur (2021, p. 212) asserted that "writing is a challenging and cognitive demanding task that requires the learner to juggle several cognitive demands". In addition, Jones (2013; p. 9) pointed out that writing is "a challenging task. It doesn't matter if you are facing a blank computer screen or typewriter, an empty journal, or a blank piece of paper, the idea of creating original work is intimidating". Accordingly, syllabus designers and teachers must give this skill a large space of pedagogical concerns and need to understand the complex nature and the process of writing which differs from one writer to another. In addition, the psychological, linguistic, and cognitive problems that encounter students, when they write, have to be greatly considered because these factors are very significant in determining students' success or failure.

3.Teachers' Feedback on Students' Writing:

Feedback is an essential writing skill that is defined as any response from a reader to a writer at any stage of the writing process or on the students' final texts. Hattie (2009, p. 174) put forth that feedback in its broad sense is conceptualized as

Information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, or one's own experience) about aspects of one's performance or understanding. For example, a teacher or parent can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement, and a learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of a response. Feedback is a "consequence" of performance .

For Keh (1990: 294), feedback is an "input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision". Furthermore, Freedman (1987: 5) defined feedback more precisely arguing that feedback "includes all reaction to writing, formal or informal, written or oral, from teacher or peer to a draft or final version". This definition entails that any reaction that addresses the students' writing is feedback. Briefly speaking, then, feedback on students' texts can be written or spoken, when the student is still thinking of ideas to write about, during the writing process, at the students final drafts, or at the students' end products. The aim of it is to help the writer recognize the different problems in his writing.

Teachers' feedback is a key element in the writing class that provides students' writing with an authentic audience and an explanation about what they are doing correctly and what they are doing incorrectly with the intention of improving the quality of the written drafts. Thus, the teacher puts forward changes that will make the students' writing readable, communicative, and effective. More than that, these comments help learners in recognizing their deficiencies and problems in writing; consequently, they apply more effort to overcome their weakness and improve their writing. According to Hyland (2003: 177) teachers' feedback is a process that "helps the writer work out the text's potential and to comprehend the writing context, providing a sense of audience and an understanding of the expectations of the communities they are writing for". Countless researchers like Ferris and Hedgcock (2005); Keh (1990) and Harmer (2001) considered teachers' feedback as a vital aspect of any writing class. In addition, Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997; in Lee, 2007) appreciate its role in improving students' writing and argued that the positive effect of teachers' feedback on motivating and encouraging students to write cannot be denied.

Teacher-students conferencing creates a fruitful interactive atmosphere where an expert (the teacher) negotiates, discusses and cooperates with his learners who are more or less of the same level and age. This is what Vygotsky (1978) call the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where the child learns solving problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. This social interaction between the teacher and a small group of students is beneficial to motivate students to write and to boost up their writing achievements. In fact,

teachers' feedback on students writing can be an interactive social process where a writer-the student and a reader -the teacher discuss the different elements and processes of the written texts, and evaluate it to identify the different challenges and obstacles to students' writing proficiency and then understand these challenges so that proficiency can occur.

4. Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Feedback:

The manner of presenting feedback determines whether this feedback is unhelpful and harmful to the students or a way to boost their writing performance. Accordingly, teachers have to know what kind of feedback should be given, the manner of giving it, its content, and mainly their students' responses, perceptions and preferences vis-à-vis their feedback. According to Cohen et al (1990; in Mishra, 2005: 94), "Clear teacher-student agreements on feedback procedures and student training in strategies for handling feedback are important factors that could lead to more productive and enjoyable composition writing in the classroom ."

Cohen (1987) conducted one of the earlier studies about students' responses to their teachers' feedback (Ferris, 2003). In his study, 217 EFL and ESL students from New York State University were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their attitudes and strategies towards teachers' feedback. The results of Cohen's study indicated that students claimed that their teacher feedback focused mainly on grammar. He also found that student subjects had "a limited repertoire of strategies for processing teacher feedback" (Cohen, 1987; in Ferris, 2003: 94). Another result is that students have faced difficulties in understanding 'cryptic' (single words or brief phrases) like "confusing" or "not clear" (Cohen, 1987; in Ferris, 2003). Cohen concluded that the "activity of teacher feedback as currently constituted and realized may have a more limited impact on the learners than the teachers would desire" (Cohen, 1987; in Ferris, 2003: 94).

In another study, Hedgecock and Lefkowitz (1996 as cited in Shrum and Glisan, 2010) interviewed EFL and ESL university students about their perceptions of the type of feedback they would like to receive from their teacher in order to improve their writing proficiency. The result of the study comes to a conclusion in which some suggestions for the best type of teacher's feedback are summarized .

- more practice in writing and more systematic opportunities to revise, e.g., through the use of quick writing, other short activities, and multiple drafts ;
- more personalized and explicit written feedback from expert readers, e.g., expert in the topic content or the language, other than the teacher, e.g., writing conferences ;
- grammatical and rhetorical feedback geared more specifically to writers' level of proficiency and degree of readiness, e.g., too much feedback or too much detail is overwhelming; students should be guided to work on selected as-pects of their writing ;
- individualized writing conferences with instructors, other expert readers, or both (Beach, 1989);

🔸 more peer interaction and response ;

🔸 more student control over the nature and extent of instructor/expert feed-back; e.g., students need to be able to ask for targeted help from experts in the areas they feel they are weak; and

🔸 more extensive reading of the L2 texts, particularly models that students are asked to imitate, e.g., reading more expository texts as models before being asked to write one.Shrum and Glisan (2010, p. 330)

5. Research Design and Methodology:

The present study aims at investigating students' perception of teachers' feedback on their writing. Investigating the students' attitudes would help teachers present the most effect and suitable feedback that really help in ameliorating and improving the short-term and long-term writing outcomes. A quantitative research based on students' questionnaire has been used. The questionnaire was given to 73 first year students of English at the Department of Foreign Languages, Abdelhafid Boussouf University Centre, during the academic year 2020/2021. The questionnaire elicits students' opinions on the usefulness of the various types of comments and feedback provided by their teacher's on their writing, and the problems they usually encounter in interpreting the teachers' comments and in utilizing those comments in revising, editing and correcting their writing.

6. Research Findings:

The findings of this study in general support the positive effect of teacher's feedback on students' writing. The analysis of the students' responses yielded significant data in that they provide a general understanding of the students' attitudes, perspectives and difficulties in using their teacher's feedback in editing their texts .

Students do want to receive teacher's feedback on their writing and pay attention to it. A vast majority-as we expected –of the participants (84%) declared that they are interested in their teachers' feedback. In fact, students appreciated the shared responsi-bility between them and their teacher for their writing progress. More than half of the participant students who took part in this study said that they prefer their teachers' feedback over their peers' feedback, and that they rely on the teacher to assist them and provide them with techniques and comments that help in boosting their writing skills. Moreover, students have argued that their teachers' feedback motivate them to practice more writing and to do better, especially if the feedback was positive. This finding is aligned with the results of a study conducted by Nation (2009) that found that positive feedback on the content of the students' piece of writing increases the amount of their writing and improves their attitude to writing, because such feedback "tells the writer that their work is being read, is understood, and interests the reader" (p. 137). The results of the study also indicated that teachers' feedback, according to the informants, help them know how much progress they have made, and what they should improve.

Yet, the students' standpoints about teachers' feedback also claimed that their teachers' feedback usually focus on surface and grammatical mistakes rather than texts organization and ideas. Moreover, participants claimed that they received more negative feedback than positive one from their teachers. Students also maintained that teachers sometimes provide incomprehensive feedback or margin comments which are difficult to interpret or to read. Some participants of this study claimed that they struggle with cryptic codes and symbols that the teachers usually use .

7 .Conclusion:

Most previous existing researches suggest that it is par for the course that teachers' feedback on students writing assignments would assist in improving learners' writing skills; however, there has been little research on the way students perceive this feedback. Teacher's feedback facilitates students writing development, and enhances students' competence in the writing skills; it is an essential part of effective writing, and a significant part of teachers' work in the writing class. The results of this study confirmed that teachers' feedback is valuable to learners and it helps them improve their writing skills. However, teachers' feedback is effective only when students understand it and can internalise what they have learned from it. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions of their teacher feedback is necessary in providing effective feedback. More than that, teachers need to take into consideration how students find their feedback and the preferences as well as the perceptions of students of their feedback. Accordingly, efficient and effective teacher feedback is the consequence of teachers' and students' cooperation in monitoring and processing this feedback.

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