

ESL Students' Perception of Teacher's Written Feedback Practice in Malaysian Classrooms

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Abstract

Providing feedback on second language (L2) writing is an essential part of a writing teacher's job. Even though each student may have different needs for and expectation of written feedback, they may not be given the chance to choose their preferred types of feedback as decisions are often made by the teachers. Motivated by this concern, this study aims to examine the current written feedback received by secondary school students in Malaysia and to reveal how they perceived the feedback. 90 students from three schools in the State of Johor were recruited as respondents and were surveyed using a self-completed questionnaire adapted from the literature. The study revealed interesting findings of erratic feedback frequency across teachers and the dominance of feedback on writing content rather than form. The participants were also found to be affected adversely emotionally despite their acknowledgment that the feedback led them to improve their writing. The study concludes by highlighting the need for a standard guideline from local education authorities to guarantee fair and equal treatment in the essay grading practice across the nation.

Keywords

Second Language (L2) Writing, Feedback, Secondary School, ESL Classrooms

1. Introduction

In developing human capital for the nation to remain competitive globally, the Ministry of Education (MoE) Malaysia has devised strategies to acquaint Malaysians with skills needed for the workplace. The emphasis on English writing skills and the need to train students to become effective writers are in line with one of the main objectives in Malaysian secondary education system. As sug-

gested by a number of studies, a significant amount of time is spent on writing at workplace to varying degrees which is dependent on positions (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Al-Buainain, Hassan, & Madani, 2010; Nur-Ehsan, & Saadiyah, 2011). Certain jobs such as the ones in retail and blue-collar manufacturing require less writing, but it is nonetheless an essential job requirement (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

Teachers at Malaysian secondary schools are allocated 200 minutes per week for each class to teach the four skills of the English language, i.e. speaking, listening, reading, and writing. From the allocation, 80 minutes are spent to teach writing with an aim to train students to utilize language for interpersonal, informational, and aesthetic purposes. There are two types of writing to be taught to upper form students (16 and 17-year-old: guided and continuous. Guided writing involves producing structured writing, such as article, report, formal letter, informal letter, and speech, whereas continuous writing is free-form writing based on a given topic. Secondary school students are tested on both types in the final national examination for secondary education also known as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM).

The earliest government document (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1986) contains some guidelines for teachers on how to teach writing which stipulates:

“The writing course must provide instructions on how to write a composition. These instructions must be presented step-by-step so that students can, after going through the steps, be able to write a composition. It is important then to provide models of the expected product, followed by various activities and exercises on grammar and vocabulary necessary to write the composition. Only then should the students be expected to write the composition”.

The guideline describes a need for the process approach of writing classroom where teachers are expected to prepare students extensively by providing instructions and samples of good compositions in a step-by-step manner prior to requesting students to submit the essay. In other words, each writing task must be preceded by writing supports in the form of grammar-conditioning and vocabulary-expanding activities. This is of particular importance to Malaysians who are mostly ESL or EFL speakers; exposure to the English language may vary from one individual to another, depending on factors such as socio-economic status and locality. However, the sad truth is the process approach may not be preferred as teachers often take a shortcut by teaching using the product approach (Palpanadan, Salam, & Ismail, 2014) due to time constraint, resulting in students having to submit their first draft as the final product (Maarof, Yamat, & Li, 2011).

However, in preparing ESL learners in Malaysia to become effective writers, the MoE has entrusted schoolteachers to assess students' writing with no explicit guidelines provided on how to comment their students' writing (Othman, 2006). The lack of guidelines often results in teachers giving writing feedback using their own methods based on their experience and prior training. Some resort to the grading rubrics for SPM. Despite the freedom of giving feedback as they wish, teachers are often indecisive. They find it challenging to be specific when

giving feedback to students. Thus, attempts in producing explicit guideline as such are crucial and it will be particularly useful to novice teachers. Understanding the present situation concerning teachers' feedback is paramount and this study was conducted to lead ways to efforts for behavioral modification. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to: 1) examine the current feedback received by Malaysian student-participants on their English writing; and 2) find out their perception of the feedback received.

Dilemma of Writing Teachers on Giving Helpful Feedback

Providing written feedback is intended to help students improve their writing by pointing out writing inaccuracies and asking questions to guide students to clarify their points further. It also carries a psychological implication by boosting students' morale as feedback is a way to indicate that the teacher has read students' work carefully (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014).

Studies have suggested that teachers are more comfortable in giving feedback on form rather than content. This move suggests to scholars that teachers are less confident about their ability to judge students' ideas and organization (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014). Therefore, they may be tempted to give these aspects less emphasis when grading. Feedback on form is most straightforward for teachers to mark, recognize and correct because it stresses only on a few complex judgement calls while ignoring the focus on the content (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014). It is considered important because when errors are committed, the clarity of the message may be jeopardized. The emphasis given by teachers is also useful as suggested by findings from previous studies that there is a positive relationship between teachers' feedback on form and successful students' revision (Alvira, 2016; Ferris, 2004). ESL students have also been found to prefer teachers' feedback on form as they were eager to learn from their grammatical mistakes (Lip, 2007) and they thought feedback on form was more helpful as opposed to feedback on content which was often found to be vague and contradictory to their perception (Zacharias, 2007).

Most ESL teachers are also more keen to comment on grammar since the curricula of many ESL countries place a great emphasis on grammar and teachers may be accused of being unprofessional if they allow grammatical errors to go unnoticed (Gray, 2004). In addition to great emphasis on grammar, teachers almost always end up correcting the writing content, a scenario that turns them into composition slaves (Hairston, 1986). Feedback on content appears to be more serious as teachers make judgement on students' writing, focusing on ideas, organization, wording and style. Several studies have concurred that the feedback on content led to writing improvement among students (Alvira, 2016; Baghzou, 2011).

Regardless of the types of written feedback given to the students, in most cases, teachers tend to give their feedback without consulting the students on their preference. The practice is common in many classrooms as suggested by scholars who argue that the teaching and learning process is often not tailored to meet

the students' needs and preference (Servilio, 2009; Tomlinson, 1999). This may lead students to neglect the comments received from their teacher entirely (Williams, 2003). When giving students a chance to request for feedback that they prefer, there is a possibility that it will motivate them as they will know which part of writing that they should improve besides indicating that teachers appreciate their writing. (Ferris, 2007) claims that teachers can at times be abusive when giving feedback and it defeats the purpose of a writing class where the teacher needs to mainly act as writing teachers rather than language teachers (Kroll, 2001).

Without a clear guideline to rely on when commenting on students' composition, it is natural that teachers' comments may not be consistent and are subject to tacit biases (Schenck & Daly, 2012). Consequently, students were reported to find teachers' feedback as vague, confusing and ineffective (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). What is worse, the feelings of distraught, fear, defensiveness, agitation and embarrassment are portrayed when the writing is abused by the teachers (Campbell, 2016). Despite a number of studies conducted to investigate teachers' written feedback in Malaysia (Razali & Jupri, 2014; Farid & Adlina, 2012; Othman & Othman, 2009), these studies mainly focused on university students. Secondary school students, however, were rarely investigated (Servilio, 2009). This study, thus, attempts to address this gap by investigating written feedback on secondary school students' English language writing. It is important to tackle this issue at the early stage so that the students can be assisted in improving their writing before being enrolled into universities where writing tasks are far more challenging.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

This study was a cross-sectional questionnaire survey design. The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies, i.e. (Ferris, 2004; Lee, 2011) and (Arafat, 2011) and were later modified to suit the local context. Due to the small number of items, the instrument reliability is reported through the inter-item correlation mean (Nunnally, 1978) and the values range from 0.2 to 4 which are considered optimal means (Briggs & Cheek, 1986). The questionnaire was divided into four main constructs. The first construct was concerned about the frequency of feedback they received, followed by the second construct that was to elicit responses on the aspects they received the feedback on. The third construct was formulated to find out the types of comment they received from their teacher and the final construct was meant to survey about their perception of these comments. Although there are several types of written feedback identified by scholars in the field, only commentary and rubrics (Nunnally, 1978) were being examined in the study.

Commentary is a type of feedback that is best considered as responding to students' work rather than evaluating what they have written. Through com-

mentary, the students are led to understand the reader's confusion which may be triggered by inadequate information, illogical organization, ineffective development of ideas, or even erroneous usage of words by the writers (Wen, 2013). Commentary can be written in two ways: marginal and end. Marginal commentary refers to the written feedback within the students' writing so as to give more specific feedback, resulting in some suggestions for solutions to any writing problems, whereas end commentary is placed at the end of the writing to a) highlight strength and weaknesses, b) set a psychological environment to encourage the students to revise and write again, c) consolidate and thwart specific behaviors and d) set achievable specific goals (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014).

Rubric, on the other hand, is a style of grading according to a set of bands or criteria fixed prior to grading. (Hyland & Hyland, 2001) discusses three types of scoring rubrics in L2 writing: 1) holistic scoring, 2) analytic scoring and 3) trait-based method. When a teacher provides holistic feedback, it indicates that the writing is given feedback as a whole. It reflects the idea that writing is a single entity best measured by a single scale that incorporates the natural qualities of the writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Unlike holistic scoring, analytic scoring covers more specifically the different aspects of writing such as the content, structure, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary and spelling by using separate scales (Bjarnadóttir, 2008). Trait-based method is designed to clearly define the specific topic and genre features of the task which is context-sensitive (Hamp-Lyons, 1991).

2.2. Participants

90 students from the Fifth Form (age 17) were recruited as respondents. They were in the final year of the secondary education level from three schools in the district of Pasir Gudang, Johor, Malaysia. The schools were chosen as they were of the same type (government-funded national secondary schools) and in close vicinity. As such, these students were deemed to come from similar socio-economic status. These students would sit for a national examination (SPM) at the end of the year and the English language is one of the compulsory subjects for them. Having gone through 11 years (six years in primary school and five years in secondary school) learning English at school, the participants spent the most time learning English in a formal context as compared to students in the other forms.

3. Results

3.1. Frequency of Feedback on Writing

The first item in the question was formulated to elicit students' response about the frequency of drafts produced and commented before submission of the final essay to the teacher. As indicated in **Table 1** the majority of the students (48.9%) reported of having submitted only one draft which was also considered the final product. This is followed by the group of students (31.1%) whose teachers ma-

naged to provide rounds of feedback on multiple drafts before the submission of the final product and students (20%) who produced two rounds of feedback on the first and final draft.

The data suggest that the frequency of feedback given to the participants varies which is dependent on individual teachers.

3.2. Aspects in Writing That Teachers Give Feedback on

The second main concern in the study is to figure out about the aspects that teachers normally give feedback on. There are 6 aspects as shown in **Table 2**. Paragraph construction is the most frequently commented on ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.01$), followed by content ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.97$) and organization ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.93$). The fourth aspect is writing mechanics ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.93$) and the fifth aspect is word choice ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.83$). Out of the six aspects, grammar is commented the least ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.83$).

3.3. Types of Comment Received from ESL Writing Teachers

Under this construct, six questions that form opposite qualities and two questions on the types of feedback were asked as indicated in **Table 3**. In terms of the depth of comments, the participants admitted to having received more detailed comments ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.81$) than general comments ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.89$). However, as far as the nature of comments is concerned, negative comments were reported to be higher ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.87$) than positive comments ($M =$

Table 1. Frequency of feedback received.

I get my feedback on:	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
My final draft only	44	48.9
My first and final draft	18	20.0
Multiple drafts and final draft	28	31.1
Total	90	100.0

Table 2. Frequency of comments received according to language aspects.

Aspects in writing	Frequency (n) and percentage (%)				Mean	s.d
	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always		
Grammar	45 (50.0%)	25 (27.8%)	19 (21.1%)	1 (1.1%)	1.73	0.83
Mechanics (e.g. punctuation, spelling)	30 (33.3%)	24 (26.7%)	33 (36.7%)	3 (3.3%)	2.09	0.93
Word Choice	26 (28.9%)	35 (38.9%)	28 (31.1%)	1 (1.1%)	2.03	0.83
Content	28 (31.1%)	27 (30.0%)	27 (30.0%)	8 (8.9%)	2.17	0.97
Organization	27 (30.0%)	26 (28.9%)	33 (36.7%)	4 (4.4%)	2.14	0.93
Paragraph construction	20 (22.2%)	21 (23.3%)	35 (38.9%)	14 (15.6%)	2.48	1.01

Table 3. Types of comments received.

Types of comment	Frequency (n) and percentage (%)				Mean	s.d
	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always		
General comments	28 (31.1%)	30 (33.3%)	28 (31.1%)	4 (4.4%)	2.09	0.89
Detailed comments	16 (17.8%)	37 (41.1%)	33 (36.7%)	4 (4.4%)	2.28	0.81
Positive comments	27 (30.0%)	31 (34.4%)	28 (31.1%)	4 (4.4%)	2.10	0.89
Negative comments	4 (4.4%)	16 (17.8%)	32 (35.6%)	38 (42.2%)	3.16	0.87
Direct feedback	20 (22.2%)	34 (37.8%)	29 (32.2%)	7 (7.8%)	2.26	0.89
Indirect feedback	5 (5.5%)	10 (11.1%)	31 (34.4%)	44 (48.9%)	3.26	0.91
End feedback	33 (36.7%)	26 (28.9%)	26 (28.9%)	5 (5.6%)	2.03	0.94
Margin feedback	13 (14.4%)	30 (33.3%)	27 (30.0%)	20 (22.2%)	2.60	0.99

2.10, SD = 0.89). When asked about the directness of feedback received from their teachers, a higher number of students agreed that they had received indirect feedback (M = 3.26, SD = 0.91) than direct feedback (M = 2.26, SD = 0.89). For the final question that asked the participants to identify the types of feedback received, margin feedback seems to be more common (M = 2.6, SD = 0.99) than end feedback (M = 2.03, SD = 0.94).

3.4. Perception of Teacher's Written Feedback

The third highlight in the study is the participants' feeling in dealing with their writing teachers' feedback as shown in **Table 4**. The majority of the participants (n = 85) either agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback helped them to improve their writing (M = 3.43, SD = 0.67). Following this are the 74 participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed reading the feedback (M = 3.04, SD = 0.85) and 71 who agreed or strongly agreed that the teachers' feedback on their writing made them feel good about themselves (M = 2.96, SD = 0.83). However, 47 participants believed that the comments were too general (M = 2.56, SD = 0.74) and only 38 participants believed that the comments were motivating (M = 2.44, SD = 0.75).

4. Discussion of Findings

From the findings on the extent of feedback given by the teachers, it suggested that all of these teachers across schools provided feedback to their students' writing without fail. However, the frequency varies from providing feedback on multiple drafts to only a first and final writing draft. This difference may arise due to either 1) the workload of each teacher (teachers with fewer non-teaching related duties may have more time to provide feedback on multiple drafts by the students), 2) teacher's job commitment level (teachers with a higher level of job

Table 4. Students' perception of written feedback received.

How do you feel about your teacher's feedback?	Frequency (n) and percentage (%)				Mean	s.d
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
It is motivating	6 (6.7%)	46 (51.1%)	30 (33.3%)	8 (8.9%)	2.44	.75
It is too general	5 (5.6%)	38 (42.2%)	39 (43.3%)	8 (8.9%)	2.56	.74
I enjoy it	2 (2.2%)	14 (15.5%)	48 (53.3%)	26 (28.9%)	3.04	.85
It helps me to improve my writing	2 (2.2%)	3 (3.3%)	39 (43.3%)	46 (51.1%)	3.43	.67
It makes me feel good about myself	4 (4.4%)	15 (16.7%)	49 (54.4%)	22 (24.4%)	2.96	.83

commitment are more prone to giving feedback on multiple drafts), or 3) the unavailability of a standard guideline by the education authority for them to adhere to on how frequent feedback should be given to students, rendering the number of feedback given to students inconsistent across the nation. Based on the first author's experience as a secondary school teacher, the only guide given to teachers is on how to grade the national examination papers, which evidently is meant to be used on a final draft. However, it is only applicable to teachers who trained to be examiners as they have to attend a marking course, an opportunity which is not given to all teachers in the country. As some of the students concurred that their teachers gave feedback only on the final draft, the finding concurs with studies by (Maarof, Yamat, & Li, 2011) and (Palpanadan, Salam, & Ismail, 2014) who report that it is common for teachers with heavy workload to ask for one draft as the final product.

In terms of the aspects that students received feedback on, the study managed to record some interesting findings that deviate from findings by previous studies that claim teachers are less confident about their ability to judge students' ideas and organization (e.g. Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014). In this study, grammar was the least frequent aspect to be commented on, and paragraph construction and content were the most frequent.

The participants in this study admitted to having received detailed but negative feedback and this was presumably the reasons why they claimed not to be motivated by this feedback. Despite this, the participants claimed that the feedback was able to help them improve. This is in line with (Baghzou, 2011)'s study that suggests improvement in students' writing is evident after having received the content feedback.

However, the comments were found to affect the students psychologically as some of them claimed that the feedback received did not make feel good about themselves and were not deemed motivating. It is likely that the feeling arises from the way the comments were worded, a situation that is similar to the study

by (Ferris, 2007) who claims that teachers can become abusive through their written feedback, leading to a state of distraught and fear among students, as recorded by (Campbell, 2016), when their writing is harshly commented. This warrants further research to describe what is really happening by analyzing actual written feedback to understand the type and nature of feedback received by Malaysian students.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that some teachers in the country embrace the process approach as required by the MoE as indicated by their feedback on multiple writing drafts. However, the practice varies from one teacher to another which necessitates some efforts for standardizing the grading practice. If the issue is left unattended, the chance for students across the nation of receiving standard and fair treatment in the English language classroom may be jeopardized. An explicit guideline as such is also important to assist novice teachers in particular who usually struggle during the beginning years of their service as they need to juggle between teaching workload and other non-teaching related duties at school. More studies need to be done by looking at student's learning evidence such as teachers' written feedback in students' exercise books and also by looking at the research variables from the teachers' perspectives.

The findings discussed in this study is hoped to be of use to ELT practitioners in the country, particularly English teachers because only by knowing how their students perceive their practice would these teachers be able to envision remedial actions. As the idea of making the English language a mandatory subject to pass in SPM by the year 2020 has been proposed and is on hold at present, teachers play an even greater role in ensuring an impactful learning experience in the English classroom.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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