

Cultivating and Understanding Effective Feedback Strategies in an Academic Writing Course

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the pedagogical value of providing effective feedback within an English for Academic Writing Course. The provision of effective feedback has long been identified as a key element of quality teaching. This view is not only restricted to the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), but applies to all forms of teaching, regardless of subject and context. Such a view of the importance of feedback in student learning is well supported by meta-analytic studies. In the last two decades feedback has become a central issue for research. However, in a second language learning context this potentiality often remains under exploited or unrealised. Furthermore, although some research has been carried out into the role of feedback, some aspects have been largely neglected. In particular, the experiences and perceptions of students towards the received feedback.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Feedback forms, Academic Writing, Student perceptions.

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Introduction

The provision of effective feedback has been identified as a key element of quality teaching. This view is not only restricted to the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), but applies to all forms of teaching, regardless of subject and context. Such a view of the importance of feedback in student learning is well supported by meta-analytic studies. In the last two decades feedback has become a central issue for research. However, in the language learning context this potentiality often remains under exploited or unrealised. Furthermore, although some research has been carried out into the role of feedback, there are particular aspects that have been largely neglected. In particular, the experiences and perceptions of students.

Encouraging positive attitudes towards the skill of writing is by no means an easy objective for either students or teachers. For students undertaking a piece of writing can be a challenge while for teachers fitting marking into a busy schedule can also present difficulties. In order to evaluate the role and effectiveness of feedback it is necessary to first consider the skill of writing from a more general perspective. The rise of the communicative approach in the classroom practice of many ESL teachers and an increased focus on spoken interaction has led to a widespread neglect of writing skills. In recent years, however, recognition of the importance of writing has grown, with writing no longer being the ‘last skill’ to be approached in language teaching.

Feedback can have a powerful influence upon language learning, Ferris (2012) rates it just below students’ own cognitive abilities and direct instruction from teacher or instructor. However, in the language learning context this potentiality often remains under exploited or unrealised. Research has been carried out into the role of feedback, but there remains particular aspects that have been largely neglected, for instance, the

experiences and perceptions of students.

Literature Review

The significance of feedback in the learning process and its relative neglect in the communicative classroom. The rise of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in the 1970s and 80s was of great influence on the classroom practice of many ESL teachers and significantly affected how writing was taught and how people viewed the role of feedback. Reitbauer (2013) states that “it is reasonable to expect a corresponding shift in feedback with the change from traditional teaching approaches and a focus on grammar to a more communicative approach”.

As Hyland (2019) points out “recently a developmental shift has come about to make feedback a more central issue in writing”. Therefore, it seems that a full circle has been completed and the skill of writing is no longer considered to be of secondary importance but is regarded as an issue of central importance. Many language teachers are therefore conscious of the important role feedback plays for students who have begun the process of learning a second language. However, in spite of this common acceptance of the importance of feedback, it seems that a number of teachers do not understand how best to administer feedback on their students’ writing tasks.

Hyland (2010) acknowledges that “there is a need to focus on teacher development with regards to how to give effective feedback”. Despite there being a clear need, it may well be the case that the provision of effective feedback is not a simple process. According to Carless (2006), “feedback is far more complex than many at first believe”. Although it may not be easy to achieve, effective feedback has a central role to play in the learning process. It is a problem if such a crucial and fundamentally complicated factor in the

facilitation of understanding remains under researched in the present context of English as an international language.

Teacher feedback on writing tasks was traditionally provided in written feedback form. Nowadays, many teachers provide verbal feedback as and when they consider it necessary in the form of a consultation. Ferris (2012) writes that teacher feedback “plays an important role for students’ writing because writing is a process approach which emphasizes a cycle of revisions”. According to Reichelt (2001), there are three main types of teacher feedback on foreign language writing: content feedback, error feedback, and the use of Coded Feedback (CF) - which is a system of identifying types of error.

Over the past three decades, researchers have disagreed about which method is the most effective and what the primary focus of feedback should be. Furthermore, the effectiveness of feedback varies greatly across institutions and from teacher to teacher. Therefore, in some cases, as Zacharias (2007) states “students are unable to actually read the teacher’s feedback”. In other cases, students face little to no problem in understanding the feedback.

Researchers have also disputed whether the feedback process should be specific or general. Knight and Yorke (2003) state that “although many teachers provide specific feedback, it is general feedback that has the greatest influence on learning”. They argue that the principal reason for this is that general feedback feeds forward into future assignments and is more easily transferable across different writing genres.

Although views differ as to what constitutes effective feedback, there seems to be little doubt amongst teachers about its overall importance. Ferris (1995), writes that “the amount of time and effort teachers spend in providing written and/or oral feedback to

their students is immense”. Given the role that feedback plays in the learning cycle, it is of importance to understand the perceptions of students towards their received feedback. However, we still understand relatively little about the perceptions of students on several aspects of feedback including feedback preferences, timeliness and emotional resonances.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How significant do students consider the feedback process to be as an agent of the learning process?

Research Question 2: How effective do students enrolled in an English for Academic Writing course consider the different forms of feedback to be?

Methodology

The study focused on one Academic Writing Class in their second year of university. The 18 students who made up the total sample were all English Major students at Kanda University of International Studies. For said English major students it is mandatory to undertake writing classes for academic purposes, and for many of these it is the first time writing at a tertiary level via the medium of English. The sample consisted of students who were all English major students, of a similar level of ability (mid-tier) and enrolled in a compulsory Academic Writing course.

Questionnaires (See Appendix One)

Data collection was carried out in two parts, with a questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews. This mixed research method was used in order to provide advantages from both quantitative and qualitative data collection. This research included a short questionnaire composed of mainly closed questions. The questionnaire was handed out

to students who had just commenced an Academic Writing course in their second year at University. The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed questions with respondents selecting their response from a 5-point scale of agreement.

Semi-Structured Student Interviews (See Appendix Two)

Students who consented and completed the questionnaires were invited to an interview with the researcher. A set list of questions were predetermined, designed and asked to the participants. These questions were followed by additional questions that were not planned in advance. The questions were not shown to participants beforehand and participants were instructed not to talk with other participants after the interview stage. Therefore predictable answers were more likely to be avoided and students were guided into a comfortable situation where they are able to express themselves more freely. The semi-structured interview phase was carried out in English by the researcher, and a variety of responses were recorded. This data was then content analysed and in turn was summarised. This was adapted from Higgins' (2000) framework for interpreting feedback, which can be summarised by: comprehensibility of discourse, power relations and emotions. Despite there being diverse opinions, there were a number of trends observed in the questionnaire in a number of student responses.

The questionnaires were handed out at the end of class and collected back shortly afterwards. All the questionnaires were collected back from the students. However, 2 out of the 18 participants did not fully complete their questionnaires. Data was collected confidentially in order to protect participants' identities.

Results:

How significant do students consider feedback to be as an agent of the learning process?

To begin with, in order to highlight student perceptions of the significance of the feedback process, the findings from item 22 (Feedback tells me what I need to do to improve my performance in a subject) in the questionnaire (see appendix 1) will be shown. The data illustrates the important role that participants in the research believed that feedback has upon the learning process. The findings show a positive correlation between the perceptions of students and shows that 30% of students strongly agreed, 34% agreed, 24% are neutral, and 12% disagreed.

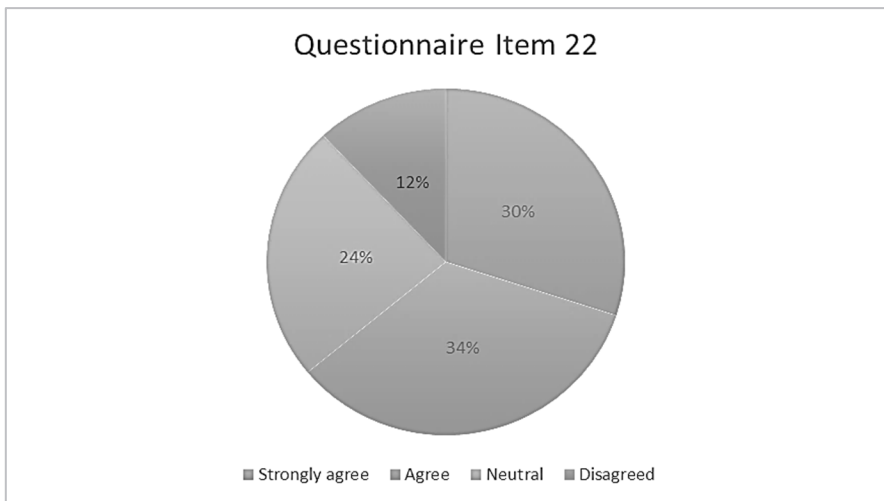


Figure 1. *Feedback tells me what I need to do to improve my performance in a subject*

Next, to indicate the relevance of the research in the context of preparing a class for writing in an Academic Context I would like to focus on the findings from item 21 (Feedback is a justification of the grade I have received).

The data indicated that the majority of students considered feedback to be a good indicator of the grade they achieved for the assignment. The results revealed that 8% strongly agreed, 36% agreed, and 44% were neutral. Only 12% of students disagreed. This suggests that students have a positive attitude towards the reliability of feedback and that is strongly linked with assessment.

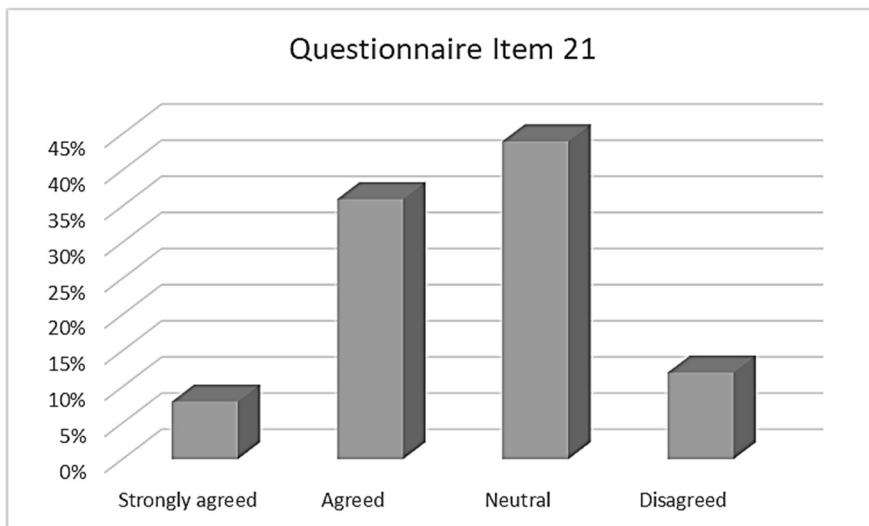


Figure 2. *Feedback is a justification of the grade I have received.*

Research Question 2: How effective do students enrolled in an English for Academic Writing course consider the different forms of feedback to be?

Looking specifically at the skill of writing, data was collected to identify preferred forms of feedback from students. Due to the range of human perceptions there are numerous ways in which this question can be answered, and as expected, not all students had the same opinion with regard to the effectiveness of different forms of feedback. In spite of

this, overall trends can be detected in the empirical data.

Almost half of the sample considered individual written comments from the teacher to be the most effective form of feedback to improve writing - with 10 students regarding it as 100 percent effective. Individual verbal comments from the teacher were also considered effective with 6 students regarding them as 100% effective. The least effective forms of feedback were considered to be self-assessment and peer feedback. Although it is clear that there is a diversity of preferences, the findings can be summarised as:

Finding 1: Students place the greatest value on individual written comments from the teacher.

Finding 2: Students prefer to receive teacher feedback individually rather than feedback being given to the whole class.

Finding 3: Students do not value self-assessment and peer feedback highly.

In the semi-structured interview phase, which consisted of a range of open-ended questions, a variety of responses were recorded. Despite there being diverse opinions, there was further evidence of the trends observed in the questionnaire in a number of student responses.

For example, the following responses from the interviews supported the first finding that 'students place the greatest value on individual written comments from the teacher'.

'The teachers writing helps me to remember, after I keep it and check again.'

'It's good for my future writings.'

'I know more easily what to spend my time doing.'

There was also support in the interviews for the second finding that ‘students prefer to receive teacher feedback individually rather than feedback being given to the whole class’.

This support consisted of responses such as:

‘I don’t want to say my mistakes in group. I am shy.’

‘I like ask the teacher about specific feedback.’

‘Everybody’s mistakes are different so how can group feedback be good?’

The third questionnaire finding that ‘Students do not value self-assessment and peer feedback highly was reiterated during the interviews:

‘Students don’t always know the answers – that is why they student.’

‘I don’t find peer feedback useful – I think other students don’t know more than me.’

‘Feedback not useful if teacher doesn’t provide it.’

During the interview phase responses were mixed. When asked what form of teacher feedback they preferred, two students found it difficult to explain their views, replying either ‘I am not sure really’, or ‘I don’t know what the difference is’. This would suggest that perhaps they did not fully understand the meanings of the different kinds of feedback in spite of an explanation being given to them. Similarly two students said that they did not have a preference, indicating that they considered it the teacher’s responsibility to decide: ‘teacher to choose what kind of feedback’. One of the students expressed a preference for written error correction, stating: ‘I think it best the teacher write the correct English for me’, while another student more emphatically voiced his lack of

understanding for coded feedback saying that *'I didn't know what the code meant'*.

Limitations of the study

It is acknowledged that the results are not necessarily representative of all language learning contexts, and in order to improve the reliability of the results, a larger scale study would need to be undertaken. Since this was a relatively small sample, it should be pointed out that the findings do not necessarily apply to all students and to all contexts. It is also important to note that the questionnaires and the interviews were conducted in English. Although the questions were graded to the appropriate level of the participants, it cannot be ignored that perhaps there may have been some misunderstanding, or indeed that participants may have answered differently if the questions had been asked in Japanese. In spite of these potential limitations, it is hoped that the study will be informative for EAP University practitioners and contribute towards the understanding of feedback and what constitutes effective feedback.

Implications

In both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview phase, which consisted of a range of open-ended questions, a variety of responses were recorded. Despite there being diverse opinions, there were some trends observed in the questionnaire and interviews. For example, the following responses from the interviews supported the first finding that *'students place the greatest value on individual written comments from the teacher'*.

'The teachers writing helps me to remember, after I keep it and check again.'

'It's good for my future writings.'

'I know more easily what to spend my time doing.'

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The third questionnaire finding that ‘Students do not value self-assessment and peer feedback highly was reiterated during the interviews:

‘Students don’t always know the answers – that is why they student.’

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‘Feedback not useful if teacher doesn’t provide it.’

The research indicated that students regard feedback as an important element of the learning process and that students rely upon feedback to improve their writing. ‘Feedback is really important and without it I can’t do well in the writing exam’. As a consequence, and in line with other research, the findings suggest that feedback is a fully integrated aspect of classroom practice.

Even when the aim is to create independence and promote autonomy amongst their learners, teachers should consider making full and appropriate use of the different forms of feedback. According to Bitchener et al’s (2008) study, “different kinds of feedback were extremely helpful for the students in enabling them to become independent writers”, and the results of this research would certainly support this.

Some SLA researchers have noted that there is a tendency to assume that students who can write well in their first language are able to transfer this skill to a L2 context. However, this assumption should not be automatic. Results from the interview stage; question 4 in the student interview support the aforementioned statement. ‘Writing is more difficult in English’, and ‘I think I am a good writer in my language but not in English’.

The research showed that there was a range of student preferences with regard to the different forms of feedback and it is important that teachers take these into account. One finding of the research was that many students had a strong preference for written feedback from the teacher. It may be the case that the educational experiences of these students have predominantly consisted of written feedback from teachers, which in turn may make them averse to other forms of feedback.

A further finding of the research was that many students do not place a high value on peer feedback. The data collected from the questionnaires was supported further with qualitative data from the interviews where the following responses were recorded: ‘Students don’t always know the answers – that is why they student.’ ‘I don’t find peer feedback useful – I think other students don’t know more than me.’

Conclusion

Given that some students regard peer feedback negatively, it may not be suitable for all learning contexts. However, it is important that teachers do not dismiss peer feedback as a potentially effective form of learning. According to Yu (2014), peer feedback can act as scaffolding, and by engaging and motivating students it facilitates learner development. In terms of how peer feedback can be best exploited in the classroom practice, it may be

necessary for teachers to explain its benefits and to introduce it gradually.

The research also indicated that the form of written teacher feedback favoured by students was error correction. The results of the student questionnaire revealed that students' greatest preference was for error feedback, with 12 from 18 participants voting this feedback form as the best. This was supported further during the interview stage by the following comments: 'I think it best the teacher write the correct English for me', and 'I prefer the teacher to choose what kind of feedback'. This preference may be linked to a tendency to regard the teacher as the primary learning instrument.

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Appendix One – Student Feedback Questionnaire

I would like to investigate student perceptions of feedback on writing tasks in English for Academic purposes class. This is with the aim of improving learning and teaching. There are no right or wrong answers in this questionnaire. Please complete the following questions on the basis of your experiences studying English at this University. Any information or personal details gathered in the course of this study will be kept confidential. No individual will be identified in any publication of the results. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

- a) What program are you enrolled on? _____
- b) What gender are you? Female Male
- c) What is your age? _____ years
- d) What is your first language? _____
- e) How long have you studied English? _____

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
SD	D	N	A	SA

1. I receive enough feedback from my teachers.

I-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I	-----I
SD	D	N	A	SA

2. The feedback I receive is related to the purpose of the assignment.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

3. Teaching staff are always willing to provide feedback.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

4. Feedback on assignments is always provided within one week.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

5. The feedback I receive is specifically related to the English for Academic Purposes.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

6. Class feedback is presented in a way so that everyone can participate.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

7. Teaching staff need to be more active in providing feedback.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

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8. I always read the feedback on my assignments.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

9. I use feedback to try and improve my results in future writing tasks.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

10. Feedback is only useful when I receive a low score.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I
SD D N A SA

Indicate how effective you think the following types of feedback are in terms of a percentage: 0% 25% 50% 75% 100% (100% equals fully effective).

11. Individual written comments from the teacher	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
12. Group verbal feedback from the teacher	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
13. Group written comments from the teacher	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
14. Individual verbal feedback from the teacher	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
15. Peer feedback	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
16. Self-assessment	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%

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- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 23. When I receive a lot of feedback I feel encouraged | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24. Feedback is the same as individual contact with the teacher | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 25. Feedback motivates me to study | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

26. How important do you think feedback is for your learning? If you are not happy with the feedback you receive, what are your suggestions for improving future feedback on your writing tasks?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!!!

Appendix Two – Student Interview Guide

1. Do you think it's important to have feedback on your writing?
2. In your experience what kind of feedback has been the most effective?
3. What kinds of feedback have you received on your writing?
4. Have you had peer feedback?
5. How effective was it?
6. What kinds of teacher feedback have you had?
7. How effective was it?
8. In your opinion should there be a grade given with feedback?
9. Do you prefer individual or group feedback?
10. What kind of written feedback from the teacher do you prefer – content / error / code?
11. How has teacher feedback helped to improve your writing?
12. Is it always clear to understand?
13. How do you think feedback on writing could be improved?