Teachers' Written Feedback: Does the Delivery Method Matter?

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Responding to student writing, which is a widely researched area, is still one of the most challenging parts of the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teacher's job. Little attention has been given to analyzing the role of *systematic feedback* on students' improvement of writing at the university. The paper reports on the results of a small-scale action research conducted among first-year undergraduate students, which explored the effect of record sheets, used as a tool to track student progress in writing argumentative essays. Apart from student portfolios and record sheets, the 8-week study used other methods of data collection that included recorded semi-structured interviews and a survey. Findings show that providing consistently structured (praise and criticism) selective (global and local) feedback to students has a positive effect both on the teacher and on student perception of feedback and, generally, their achievements in developing writing skills. The study may motivate EAP practitioners to change their current classroom practices and seek more effective ways of responding to student writing.

Keywords: feedback to student writing, record sheets, consistent feedback, tracking student progress at university, EAP

Feedback on students' academic development plays an important role in helping them adjust to university life. For instance, feedback on students' writing allows them to see how others perceive their work and to learn about the nature of the university education, about the "role of writing in learning, about their identity as students, [and] about their competence as writers" (Hyland, 2006, p. 102).

While responding to student writing is a widely researched area, and both teachers and students feel that teacher written feedback should be an integral part of the writing process (Ferris, 2001; Hyland, & Hyland, 2001; Montgomery, 2007), it is still one of the most time-consuming and challenging parts of the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teacher's job.

Previous research suggests that there are "different and legitimate ways to respond to student writing that may vary across students, teachers and specific contexts" (Ferris, 2007, p. 175); however, little attention has been given to analyzing the role of *systematic feedback* on students' improvement of writing. In this article, *systematic feedback*, is defined as a regular commentary on students' written assignments, provided in a consistent way, to "express a teacher's stance and beliefs about writing and negotiating a relationship with learners" (Hyland, 2001, p. 186).

From both theoretical and practical points of view, it is important to understand whether tracking students' progress in writing helps to "create a supportive teaching environment" (Hyland, p. 186) and serves the purposes of motivating and helping students to develop their writing skills. This study was based on several assumptions: feedback should follow relevant assessment criteria (Ferris, 2007); comments should highlight students' strengths and items/areas that need improvement (e.g. Hyland, 2001; Treglia, 2008); feedback should be both content-focused and form-focused (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2001, 2007; Hyland, 2001) and be tailored to the needs and progress of individual students; it should address the students' reactions to these comments (Treglia, 2008) and "find the correct balance between *intervention* (helpful) and *appropriation* (harmful)" (Ferris, p. 167). With this in mind, the primary aim of this research was to explore

whether record sheets, context-specific forms used to provide regular systematic feedback, help develop students' essay writing skills.

Materials and Methods

Many studies on feedback in second language writing suggest that it is a "crucial means of encouraging students' learning and writing" (Leki, 2006, as cited in Poverchjuc 2011, p. 144; see also Black & William, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2006), while at the same time, responding to student writing is one of the most challenging tasks that writing instructors have to face.

The extent to which students benefit from feedback has been debated since Truscott (1996) questioned the effectiveness of grammar correction, by which he meant "correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student's ability to write accurately" (p. 329) and suggested that the practice should be abandoned in favour of other aspects of writing, such as "organization and logical development of arguments" (p. 356). While that study was limited to discussing corrective feedback on grammar, a more balanced approach that incorporates content-focused and form-focused or global and local feedback (Bitchener, 2007; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 2006, 2007; Montgomery, 2007), has been widely adopted since then. However, empirical studies have shown that teachers primarily "address local issues of grammar and mechanics, which might suggest to students that they should prioritize local errors" (e.g. Montgomery, 2007). In her seminal paper, "Preparing teachers to respond to student writing", Ferris (2007) argues that the balance between content-focused and language-focused feedback should be found and that it should be selective, in other words, it should focus on a limited number of items, as the goal of motivating students to improve their writing and become autonomous learners is more important than fixing particular problems.

Students' reaction to teacher comments is another controversial issue. The students may not understand and, hence, fail to make good use of feedback provided to them (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, as reviewed in Poverjuc, 2011, p. 144; see also Price, O'Donnovan & Rust, 2007). Research also shows that their understanding of the teacher comment might be affected by different factors, such as the wording (directive vs. mitigated), functions (praise, criticism, and suggestion) and delivery method (cyber-tutoring, face-to-face conferencing, written commentary: marginal or end/cover memo) of the feedback (Ferris, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Treglia, 2008). For example, too much criticism may affect students' self-confidence and motivation (e.g. Connors & Lunsford, 1993). At the same time, students find commentary providing "some acknowledgment of their writing, [offering] specific suggestions, and [giving] them choices" being most helpful (see, e.g., Treglia, p. 105). Moreover, teachers do not have to mitigate their critical remarks, but should be aware that "comments that combine praise with constructive criticism are an effective tool to provide students with the confidence and motivation they need to actively engage in the [learning] process" (Treglia, p. 130). Hyland and Hyland (2001) argue that teachers make decisions when responding to student writing, which are based on a "desire to negotiate interactions that recognize both the learner's struggle to make meaning ..... and the fragile intimacy of teacher-student relationship" (p. 192).

While this literature review provides theoretical support for teachers providing feedback on student writing, it also points to the possible reasons why feedback may fail to be a successful tool in improving student writing. However, apart from several studies that mention interactive cover sheets/cover memos or end notes as a method of feedback delivery, little research has been done on providing consistently structured feedback to students and its effect on student perception of their achievements in developing their writing skills.

Research Context

The International College of Economics and Finance (ICEF) is a double degree BSc programme, where English is used as a medium of instruction. EAP classes are aimed at supporting the ICEF students as they adjust to their studies, so they can make considerable progress in their academic development as future economists. The EAP writing course is taught to first year students, aged 16–17, whose level is B2 or higher on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale. Student performance is assessed formatively through weekly home assignments (essays and other writing tasks) and summatively through a midterm and a final exam, International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Although there is no official policy, the EAP teachers are expected to provide feedback on both local (grammar, vocabulary and mechanics) and global issues (content and organisation). Students usually complete only one draft, on which they are given feedback; essay revisions are rare, so the feedback they get is more like feedforward to their future essays.

The study was designed to answer the following research questions: Will the use of record sheets as a tool of tracking feedback help develop students' writing skills. If so, how?

Participants

Although most students submitted their essays during the first semester, only a few students did that regularly and observed the deadlines; so, for the purposes of the project, it was decided to keep it small and, out of thirty students, a group of 10 students was chosen, those who were willing to participate. The study's intervention took place over one semester. The students wrote an in-class 40-minute diagnostic IELTS-type essay at the end of the first semester. The essays were assessed by independent English teachers, i.e. not the students' teachers; the students were informed of the final results.

Data Collection Tools

The data for the study comprised ten student portfolios of at least six essays, with feedback, that the students submitted during 8 weeks in the second semester and the essay they wrote at the end of the first semester. All the essays that students wrote during the second semester were formatively assessed. The deadlines for essay submission (one essay per week) were set, which the students were expected to meet. The students had four hours of EAP classes per week, which included a two-hour writing component.

Besides the teacher feedback samples taken from the essays in student portfolios, data were collected from the feedback record sheets (Appendix 1), which were completed for each student on a weekly basis. The record sheets were adapted from a tool developed at the University of East Anglia, and their design incorporated best practices for responding to student feedback. The record sheets stated features of academic writing as well as summary of level of student writing skills development as praise or criticism e.g. Done well, Needing work (week 1), Continuing to do well from week 1, Now doing well, Now needing work (week 2). Unlike cover sheets, which are in use at some universities, record sheets helped to track the students' progress over two months and were supposed to give the teacher a balanced view of the progress the students made, and at the same time reinforced the classes as made it possible for the teacher to refer to the students' essays and provide generic feedback. The record sheet information replicated the one students received as an endnote, a short comment written at the end of the essay, which summarized in the form of praise and criticism (Done well, Improvement needed) and were based on the marginal and in-text comments made in the essay . The initial plan was to use record sheets in oral feedback sessions with the students, but the interviews showed that some students preferred written feedback to oral feedback, so the endnote was chosen for the students to see the summary of the main things they did well and things they needed to improve, and left the record sheets to the teacher, making quick references to them while talking to the students during office hours.

By the beginning of the second semester, the students had been introduced to the basic concepts and features of writing, such as academic style, coherence and cohesion, paragraphing, references, hedging, as well as the criteria on which their essays had been assessed, namely, Task response, Coherence and cohesion, Lexical resource, Grammatical range and accuracy, which sometimes included referencing to sources. Making students aware of these criteria was important in order to provide feedback that would "help them progress toward meeting the standards" (Ferris, p. 170). In the second semester, several features of writing were reviewed, the choice of which was based on the formative essay assessment. Student essays informed the teacher about the specific things that needed to be reviewed in the areas of content (addressing the topic, relevance of information), organization (thesis statements, cohesive device), accuracy (passive forms, conditionals, relative clauses, subject-verb agreement) and mechanics (punctuation in relative clauses, referencing). In the feedback, a selective, rather than comprehensive approach was taken by focusing on two to four most significant feedback points in the essay, such as the quality of thesis statement and how it was developed in the main body, or, the use of topical vocabulary, rather than addressing every single problem.

Data Analysis Tools

In the study's second week, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant receiving feedback from the students on their attitude towards classroom practices. The students were asked to evaluate their progress in writing in the last two months, answer six questions and explain their choices. These questions (Appendix 2) asked students which of the listed activities (self-evaluation; peer evaluation; analysis of model texts; written feedback from peers; oral feedback from peers; written feedback from the teacher; oral feedback from the teacher) they found most and least useful. They were also asked whether they understood the assessment criteria and could identify the areas they needed to improve most in their writing.

In week four, the students were invited to participate in a survey (Appendix 3), which was aimed at collecting data on their perceptions of teacher feedback, which had been provided in written (marginal or in text) and oral formats. The survey included closed items; the students could add comments on the questions and their answers. The survey questions addressed topics such as: how they felt when they finished writing an

essay; whether they read all of the written comments or just some of them; how they felt after reading the teacher's after reading the teacher's comments; which feedback method they preferred and why. The answers and comments were categorized according to recurring themes and then analysed.

Results

Submission Rate

On a general note, essay submission increased – 8 students out of 10 met the deadlines and completed at least one essay per week, which could be the result of setting the deadlines for essay submission. If the students failed to submit their essay on time, they could not get feedback from the teacher the following week or participate in class discussions and other activities, e.g. self-evaluation and peer evaluation. Having a system in place and doing things consistently seemed to motivate both the students and the teacher.

Student Perception of own Progress and Needs: Interview

The results of the interview showed that the students were enthusiastic about receiving timely feedback and asked many questions not so much about the grades, but about particular items in the feedback.

Table 1 shows that eight students out of ten evaluated their progress in writing (Q1) as Good or Very Good; only two of them thought that they made Fair progress – those students had actually submitted the smallest number of essays during the period under consideration. All the students found written feedback from the teacher (WF(T)) to be most useful; Five chose self-evaluation (SE), analysis of model texts (AMT) and oral feedback from the teacher (OF(T)) to be equally important (Q2). Among the four criteria

areas they needed to improve Lexical resource (LR) and Grammatical range (GR) accounted for eight and five respectively. Four students mentioned Coherence and Cohesion (CC) as their improvement area; only two mentioned Task response (TR) as an area they thought they needed to improve, which did not always correspond to what the results of the diagnostic test showed (Q3, Q4).

Surprisingly, some students preferred written feedback to oral feedback. Below is an example of part of the interview, in which the student explains his preference :

T: *Which of the listed activities do you find most useful?*

S: *The most useful for me is self-evaluation and, of course, written feedback from the teacher...*

T: *Why?*

S: *Mmm.... because you can understand what you did wrong and then deal with it.*

T: *Can you explain why you find self-evaluation useful?*

S: *Well, I think it's the most important because if you can't understand it, you can't attain your goal.*

T: *And oral feedback?*

S: *I have a good short-term memory. I need to see it (feedback) written to remember it later.....*

It is not clear whether the student would choose written feedback only because he thinks he has a bad long-term memory. According to some studies, learners may have "cultural or social inhibition about engaging informally with authority figures, such as teachers, let alone questioning them" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 83), which might be the case with Russian students.

Student Perception of Feedback: Survey

The results of the Survey showed that the majority of students (78%) felt optimistic after they finished writing an essay; 22% felt they could do better. All students reported that they read all the comments

Table 1
Results of interviews on student perceptions and preferences

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
Q1	Fair	Good	Very good	Good	Very good	Good	Good	Fair	Very good	Very good
Q2	WF(T) SE	WF (T) OF(T) MT	WF(T) SE PE	WF(T) PE OF(P)	WF(T) AMT	WF(T) SE	WF(T) AMT OF(T)	WF(T) OFS OF (T)	WF(T) SE OFT	WF(T) MT
Q3	Y N	Y Y	Y Y	Y N	Y Y	Y Y	Y Y	Y Y	Y Y	N Y
Q4	LR	GR	GR	LR	LR	TA GR	LR CC	CC	TA	TA CC

in the feedback. 75% students felt that they were encouraged after reading the comments.

When asked about the methods of feedback they prefer (see Figure 3), the majority of the students mentioned feedback on grammar (89%) and a short commentary (90%) at the end of the essay, endnote. 67 per cent of the students expected the teacher to give feedback on content / ideas, which is nearly twice as many as those who chose feedback on organization and mechanics. Surprisingly, vocabulary was chosen by only 44 per cent of the students. Contrary to popular belief, students preferred that the teacher wrote a moderate number of comments to writing a lot of or very few comments.

The study also provided evidence that feedback to student writing should not be limited to justifying the grade only and that the teacher's comments evolved from standard phrases taken from the essay marking criteria and descriptors to more personalised comments that would be 'a response to a person rather than to a script' in other words, 'construct a context that relates feedback to specific learners' (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 206, 213). This became clear from the survey, the interview and the conversations during office hours. Below are some examples from the survey open comments:

"I do not think that the number of comments is important. I would prefer every helpful piece of information that you give to me in comments. If there is less information, I can ask you about it."

"I think you should emphasise our weaknesses, but also tell us about our strengths in order to show some good tendencies".

Discussion

The results of this study may suggest that responding to student writing in a systematic way may have a positive influence on the students. Firstly, if properly organised, it helps to shape students' expectations and track their achievements. Many students seem to think that addressing local errors (grammar and mechanics) is the most important part of writing classes. Nevertheless, it does not follow that teachers should not change their own and their students' practices and expectations, as, for example, the emphasis on local issues may suggest to students that they should prioritize local errors. Secondly, keeping a record of student progress, in the long run, is likely to result in limiting the feedback to the most important issues, which could benefit the students,
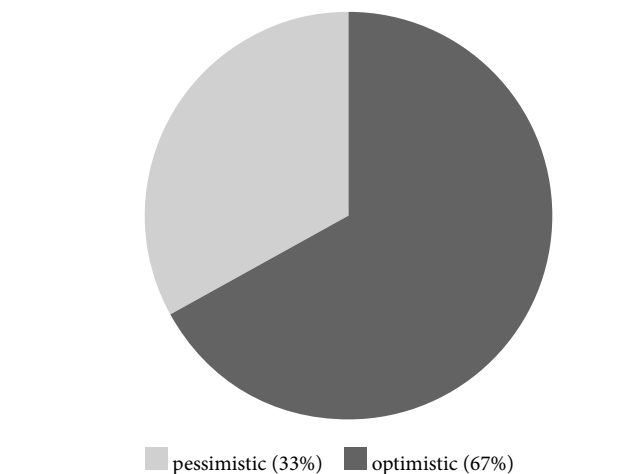

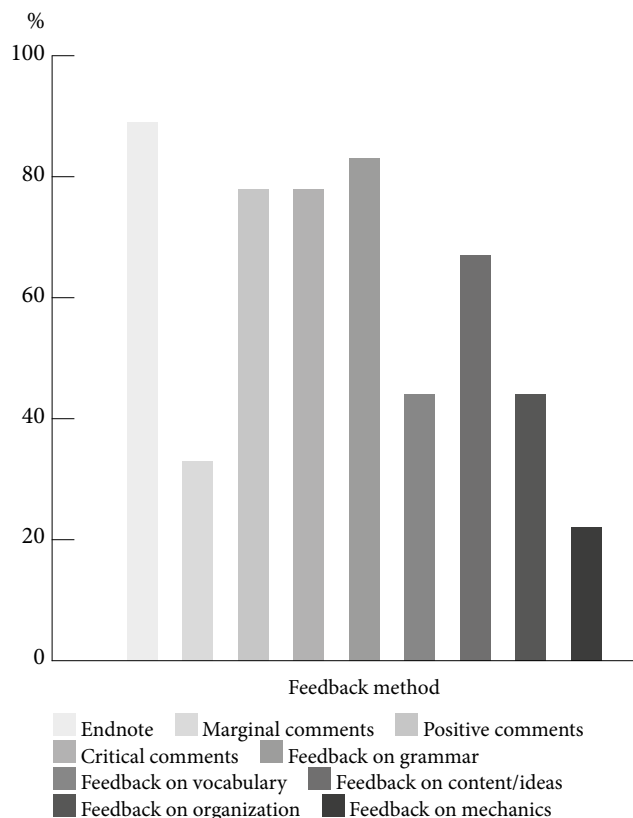*Figure 2*. Student perception of teacher feedback.

Figure 3. Student preferences of feedback methods.

because they are more likely to have a positive perception of the teacher feedback and to respond to the feedback they get, which facilitates the process of their writing skills development. Thirdly, there is widespread opinion among EFL educators in Russia that students can benefit from extensive feedback. The study showed that the students seem to prefer

moderate number of comments, which would combine praise and criticism. More research is needed in order to understand how both types of comments affect individual students as they have the "potential to construct the kinds of relationships which could either facilitate or undermine a student's writing development" (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 207).

Finally, while it is useful to have a bank of phrases and use them appropriately in teacher feedback comments, teacher comments should go beyond simple decisions to address form or content or to praise mechanics or criticize organization. EAP instructors need to provide helpful advice and, at the same time, negotiate interpersonal relationship that will facilitate its development (p. 208) as "thoughtful feedback tailored to the needs of an individual student and his/her evolving text and writing is a gift, and perhaps the most important thing a writing instructor can do for his/her students" (Ferris, p. 169).

Conclusion

"Response to student writing is extremely challenging to do well, and it takes considerable reflection and experience" (Ferris, p. 179). Further research is necessary into the role of feedback on teaching and learning and methods of its delivery to students. It is important to encourage students to be responsible and to develop a sense of ownership over their writing. Even though they may not be highly proficient in English, they are mature enough to engage in a dialogue about their writing with their instructors. The teacher should be aware that combining criticism with praise can be an effective tool to provide students with the confidence and motivation they need to actively engage in the writing process (Treglia, 2008). One of the ways to achieve this is through a systematic and constructive dialogue with their students and using different tools to monitor students' progress, which has a role to play in the process.

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Appendix 1

Record sheet (example)*
Student (name)_____

	Features of Academic Writing	Notes	Action Plan
WEEK 1			
Done well			
Needing work			
Needing work			
WEEK 2			
Continuing to do well from week 1			
Needing work from week 1			
Now doing well			
Now needing work			
WEEK 3			
Now doing well			
Now needing work			
Needing work from week 2			

Appendix 2

Questionnaire April 9, 2014

1. How would you evaluate your progress in writing during the past months?
Excellent   Very good   Good   Fair   Poor

2. Which of these activities do you find most useful? Explain.
o   Self-evaluation
o   Peer evaluation
o   Analysis of model texts
o   Written feedback from your peers
o   Oral feedback from your peers
o   Written feedback from your teacher
o   Oral feedback from the teacher

3. Do you understand writing assessment criteria/ rubrics/descriptors?

4. Which of the four criteria areas for your essays do you think you need to improve most?

5. What goals do you currently have to improve your essays? Explain.

6. How are you going to achieve these goals?

7. Comments

Appendix 3

Quick survey (May)

1. How do you feel when you finish writing an essay?
☐ I am optimistic about having done a good job.
☐ I usually feel I could have done better.

2. When I return your essay, do you read all of the written comments or just some of them?
☐ All of them
☐ Most of them
☐ Some of them
☐ None of them

3. How do you usually feel after reading my comments?
☐ Encouraged
☐ Same as before
☐ Discouraged

4. Which feedback method do you prefer?
Please choose ALL the options that reflect your answer.
☐ Endnote (my short commentary at the end of your essay)
☐ Marginal comments (e.g. sp – spelling, s-v – s-v agreement., ss – sent structure, ww – wrong word)
☐ Positive comments
☐ Critical comments
☐ Feedback on grammar
☐ Feedback on vocabulary
☐ Feedback on content/ideas
☐ Feedback on organisation
☐ Feedback on mechanics (e.g. punctuation)

5. Do you prefer that I write.....
Please explain the reason for your preference.
☐ a lot of comments?
☐ a moderate number of comments?
☐ very few comments?

6. Thank you!