

Saudi EFL Students' Responses to Written Corrective Feedback on Writing

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Abstract

Despite research emphasis on learners' responses to teacher written feedback on writing, how students view the entire process of receiving feedback needs to be addressed from students' reflections and perspectives. The current study, therefore, aims to address how 20 Saudi EFL undergraduate students reflect on their actual processing of and reactions to feedback. Based on a qualitative analysis of learners' written reflections and oral follow-up interviews, the findings show that although most of the learners seemed to view feedback as a process of cognitive engagement with writing that enables them to figure out their errors in writing, they sometimes got confused and found it difficult to understand the messages of some written feedback. Moreover, the findings revealed students' positive evaluation of, reactions to and preference for teacher's feedback in the forms of suggestions and explicit comments. The study offers pedagogical implications for teachers in how to compose effective feedback that promotes students' responses to it. It also suggests useful directions for future research on exploring feedback practices from students' perspectives in writing classroom.

Keywords: written feedback, writing, reaction, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Teacher written corrective feedback (CF) as a kind of formative assessment of students' performance in writing is highly emphasized in writing classrooms, especially in the English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts (Alqunayeer, 2020; Amara, 2015; Qutob, & Madini, 2020; Zarifi, 2017). Many EFL learners are challenged by how to effectively write a text in English due to their English language proficiency and knowledge of the content, genre and grammar and vocabulary in English in addition to their motivation, attitudes and willingness to write in English (Kang & Han, 2015; Langer, 2011). This challenging issue is no exception in the context of the current study where Saudi EFL learners find writing a daunting task, especially in the earlier stage of English learning at university. Therefore, teacher feedback has been emphasized as an integral part of EFL writing instruction (Alqunayeer, 2020). It is also regarded as a type of support to EFL students in writing.

Although university instructors may continue providing feedback to their students, students may not benefit from it in improving their writing, and may find it difficult to understand and interpret its meaning. Therefore, it is necessary to allow learners to comment on teacher feedback as one way to articulate their interpretation of the received feedback. Despite the emphasis on students' engagement with feedback (Esmaili & Behnam, 2014; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018), how students react to teacher feedback or how they affectively engage with teacher feedback has been under-researched or under-investigated (Han & Hyland, 2015; Hyland, 2003; Mahfoodh, 2017; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018). "We need to understand and acknowledge student reactions and preferences for feedback" (Goldstein, 2004, p. 70). Such topic is important for writing teachers and instructors in order not only to enhance their feedback practices in writing classrooms but also to understand whether and how students are willing to receive feedback and act upon it in improving their writing skills (Bacquet, 2019; Han & Hyland, 2015). Research on how student receivers of feedback describe their reactions, including judgment of feedback, feelings and preference for feedback is an important way of evaluating teacher feedback practices (Bader, Burner, Iversen, & Varga, 2019). It is important for writing instructors to take into consideration students' preferences of the type of feedback they want to receive on their writing (Haupt & Bikowski, 2014; Nurmukhamedov, 2009). Therefore, the current study, by focusing on students' responses to teacher written feedback elaborated by electronic (e-) comments on opinion essays written by 10 pairs of Saudi undergraduates attempted to answer the following specific research question:

RQ1. How do Saudi EFL undergraduates process and react to teacher written feedback on their writing?

RQ2. Which feedback patterns do Saudi EFL learners prefer to receive on their writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Written Feedback

Processing of feedback refers to the process in which students cognitively and metacognitively engage with the received feedback. In other words, it is a process in which learners try to interpret and understand the intent/message of teacher feedback on their errors in writing. As they cognitively process such feedback, learners often talk about what this feedback means, explain the type and nature of error (s) addressed by such feedback. Their cognitive processing of feedback involves their interpretation vs. misinterpretation of the feedback,

clarifications and elaboration (Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Studies indicate that some learners find it difficult to cognitively engage with feedback and therefore, they may fail to understand it because of their limited language proficiency, knowledge about the content and linguistic knowledge about grammar and vocabulary. According to Weaver (2006), some students fail to understand and interpret feedback and seem uncertain about it due to the lack of clear guidance. Misinterpretation is possible to occur, which negatively impact students' responses to feedback.

Exploring students' reactions to feedback from their perspectives adds to our understanding of students' responses to teacher written feedback. According to Treglia (2009), generally, students appreciated teacher commentary feedback because it provided directions and suggestions on how to improve their writing. Moreover, the majority of them received indirectness as a way to minimize hurting of feelings, while they felt discouraged and unmotivated by negative comments that candidly or directly pointed at their issues in writing. In other words, they perceived directness of feedback as a lack of respect of their feelings. They also felt enthusiastic to receive comments that provide them with a sense of directions but allow them to decide for themselves how to revise their texts. As reported by Hyland (2003), although all the six case students perceived the value of teacher's form-focused feedback and its role in helping them to detect the errors in their texts and improve them, some of them showed preference for feedback on content rather than linguistic accuracy. The researchers suggested that instructors should be aware of students' beliefs when giving them feedback. To achieve this, instructors should allow a space for students to reflect on the feedback they receive on the different aspects of their writing.

In addition, Hyland and Hyland (2001) found that whereas some students seemed appreciative of teacher positive feedback, other students discounted such positive feedback as a mere strategy to sugar-coat the critical tone and sometimes general and almost irrelevant to their errors. Another issue is explicitness of feedback. As found by Ferris and Roberts (2001), students felt more satisfied and preferred explicit feedback as they chose the method of coding the error and labelling them. Therefore, the authors suggested that less explicit feedback could be used in order to help students revise their texts for the short-run. However, explicit feedback may not promote students' cognitive engagement with feedback and acquisition of linguistic resources as well as reduction of errors over time.

In a few recent studies (Han & Hyland, 2015; Hyland, 003; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018), students' reaction to feedback is equavelent to affective engagement with teacher feedback. This includes their evaluation, emotions and appreciation of feedback. The findings indicate that although students' affective engagement with feedback varied from positive to negative among individual students, such affective engagement influences students' behavioural engagement or text revisions. Mahfoodh (2017) reported that students' responses to teacher feedback were inclusive of their positive emotions, such as happiness and satisfaction as well as negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction, frustration and disappointment. The study concluded that students' emotional responses affect their success in revising their texts based on teacher feedback.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The current study used a qualitative research design that aims to answer the question of how. In other words, this approach to research is effective in eliciting detailed information from the participants about their feelings and reactions to feedback. Reflection, therefore, as an integral part of qualitative research, allows researchers to better understand how participants think of and feel about their actual practices. To achieve this, the study used online reflections through open questions as well as follow-up face-to-face group interview.

3.2 Study Setting and Participants

The current study was conducted among 20 EFL undergraduate students joining a writing course in a Saudi university. The course introduces them to paragraph writing of diverse genre. In order to sufficiently engage learners in writing tasks during the semester, the instructor engaged these students in four writing tasks (pair work), two of which were given instructor feedback through the Blackboard Forum (Screenshot 1). Then, students had to revise accordingly and submit the final drafts for marks and assessment.

3.3 Data Collection and Analyses

After completing the writing, feedback and revision activities, the instructor assigned students to writing an account as reflection on the feedback activities. Students' written reflection was guided through some questions (Appendix A). Most of the students posted their accounts in the written form in the Blackboard Forum; however, a few of them recorded it in voice messages shared to the course WhatsApp group. Another source of data is the follow-up interview. The interview covered important and specific questions eliciting further information and elaborations on students' reflective accounts (Appendix B). The students were interviewed face-to-face, but due to the time restriction, some of them were asked to read the questions one by one and record their responses through WhatsApp messages.

Once all audio data was listened to, transcription began. Then, the transcriptions were all organized into word files. After that, they were read carefully and thematically coded and analysed. Finally, each theme and sub-theme was represented by sample responses quoted from students' reflections and follow-up interviews. These themes and sub-themes are discussed in the finding section.

4. Findings

4.1 How do Saudi EFL Undergraduates Process and React to Teacher Written Feedback on Their Writing?

4.1.1 Processing of Feedback

Based on the thematic analysis, five sub-themes emerged from the data that illustrate students' reflection on their processing of feedback

(Table 1). First, written feedback is described by all students as a means to fostering learners' cognitive processes, such as thinking about the errors in writing. It also entices students' reading their assignments from the reader's perspective, which means that students try to regulate their thinking about errors through reading. Despite this positive result, students reported several issues and difficulties in processing the written feedback on their assignments. These challenging issues include their confusion about their errors, occurrence of misunderstanding meaning of feedback and difficulty in using some feedback in revising their assignments.

Table 1. Sub-themes of students' reflection on processing feedback

Sub-themes	Sample quoted responses
Thinking about errors	2P1: So I tried to read it and read it and think what the issue was and fixed it.
Reading from author perspective	S1P11: Sometimes, when we think of our writing and who write it, we tend to oversee any problem. So with the second eye, I mean the peers, they may have a deeper look at our writing. So feedback is more comprehensive
Confusion	S11: The comments are well constructed but sometimes I found it confusing
Misunderstanding	S5: I do have some misunderstanding when reading some comments because they are brief.
Difficulty acting upon feedback	S2P4: I think it's not difficult to understand the feedback, but it's difficult for me how to do the revision and fix my issues.

4.1.2 Reaction to Feedback

The thematic analysis of students' reflections and follow-up interviews also allowed for better understanding of how students describe their reactions to feedback. The first aspect of students' reactions to feedback is their judgment or evaluation of the written feedback on their writing. In this regard, almost all students appreciated the role of teacher feedback in assisting them to revise their assignments. Specifically, they described teacher feedback as helpful, useful and engaging. For instance, what was stated by S6 represents students' positive evaluation of teacher feedback:

S2P6: I find it helpful because I could know what to improve on the next task.

In addition, students' satisfaction of the quality of teacher feedback, which is important to understand their reactions to feedback, could be due to the role of written feedback in enhancing their learning of the course content:

S1P4: Yes I am satisfied with all the feedbacks and comments given by the lecturer because at the end of the day, both of us got to really learn and understand the content of the course.

When students were asked about their feelings once they received teacher feedback on their assignments from the instructor, most of them (15) described their good and satisfactory feelings. They also reasoned this by referring to the kind of help or support they received from the instructor through his written feedback in revising and improving their texts:

S2P1: After reading the comments on my writing, I felt very good because the feedback helped me to improve my writing.

S1P9: Most of the time I read my teacher comments on our assignment, I felt happy and satisfied about it.

On the other hand, 5 of the students described their feelings as being shy or embarrassed because they could see their errors or mistakes in their assignments through the teacher's eye or feedback:

S2P10: When I read the comments, to be honest, I felt embarrassed sometimes because I made so many silly mistakes such as the use of articles and punctuations in English.

Concerning whether the teacher feedback was critical and harsh, although the majority of students (14) stated that the teacher feedback was critical for it pointed at their issues and flaws critically, they acknowledged that the teacher feedback they received did not appear harsh. Some of them also believed in the importance of teacher's critique conveyed through his feedback:

S1P8: I don't think the teacher feedback is harsh but surely it is critical in a friendly manner. I believe critical feedback is important to produce a good quality of work.

However, other remaining students (6) admitted that the teacher feedback was neither critical nor harsh. For instance, S11 is one of those students who stated so in the follow-up interviews:

S1P1: No, the feedback was not critical or harsh. Every feedback was taken with a grain of salt and used to further find ways on how to better enhance our assignment.

Another interesting theme emerging from the follow-up interviews refers to students' self-confidence once receiving teacher feedback on their written tasks. Most of them (18) recognized the role of teacher feedback in raising their self-confidence to revise their written assignments:

S2P3: I felt a lot confident to revise my writing and what to expect on it after I received feedback from the teacher.

In contrast, the other two students appeared to be less confident than other students. When they were asked why they felt so, they stated that they could not fix or revise all issues in their assignments addressed by the teacher through his feedback (S1P7) and attributed this to their language ability (S1P2):

S1P7: Not that confident because I think could not revise my assignment properly for each issue even after receiving all feedback.

S1P2: I felt less confident because of my English and found it difficult to revise our assignment.

4.2 Which Feedback Patterns do Saudi EFL Learners Prefer to Receive on Their Writing?

In relation to students' views on their preferences for feedback, they expressed different views on the different patterns of teacher feedback in terms of its linguistic functions, most of the students (16) preferred teachers' formulation of feedback in the form of advice or suggestions. According to them, they perceived suggestions more useful since this feedback provides them with advice on what and how to revise their assignments:

S2P2: I would say suggestions are better because we can get directions on how to revise our assignments and we can follow these suggestions easily.

On the other hand, other students (4) preferred teacher feedback in the form of questions. For these students, they viewed teacher's questions as a means to stimulate or challenge their thinking and motivate them to read and fix their issues in assignments:

S1P5: I really liked when he commented on our assignments by questions. Sometimes, I found them difficult but they were challenging for me to try my best to give correct revisions.

Finally, for students' preference for the nature of teacher feedback: explicit feedback (feedback explicitly stating their issues in writing) or implicit feedback (feedback implicitly hinting at such issues in their writing rather than identifying and explaining issues), all of them preferred teacher explicit/direct feedback over implicit/indirect feedback. Their preference for such feedback as represented by S2P7's voice in the interview is due to the easiness involved in understanding their issues and revising them through teacher direct feedback:

S2P7: And for me, I prefer direct feedback because I find difficult or don't like underling. I mean if someone says directly to me, I understand him and then, immediately work on it. For example, if you tell me directly "this sentence is not well structured", then I will work on it and make changes to it even if you don't help me how to fix it. So that's why I prefer direct feedback.

5. Discussion

Investigation of students' processing and reacting to teacher feedback from their commenting on the feedback and perspectives reveals interesting insights into how students process the received feedback. Despite the role of feedback admitted by all students in prompting their cognitive processes such as thinking about and reflecting on their errors in writing, students reported that they were sometimes challenged by how to successfully understand some feedback and consequently, appeared confused, uncertain and in some cases, misinterpreted feedback and failed to successfully revise their assignments. This is not new given that such misinterpretation and confusion about teacher feedback have been documented in several previous studies (Han & Hyland, 2015; Hyland, 003; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018). However, this finding implies contradictory views between how students reflect on feedback and how they actually engage with it and act upon it.

Another interesting finding is that, from reflection on feedback, we are able to understand how students evaluate, react to and express their preference for teacher feedback on their written assignments. First, the value of teacher feedback is highly recognized by students since it is a form of teacher's support to them in detecting the issues in their academic writing, revising and improving their written assignments. This finding also corroborates evidence on students' appreciation of teacher feedback owing to the role of support and directness in enhancing their writing (Treglia, 2009).

For students' emotional reactions to teacher feedback in this study, the findings show that whereas the majority of students' voices in the follow-up interview describe their happy or satisfactory feelings upon teacher feedback, the minority of them describe their shyness as a result of having their errors or issues identified by their instructor. In addition, while most students do not seem to perceive the instructor's feedback as harsh but critical, a few of them neither view it as harsh nor do they feel it critical. Previous research reported fluctuations of students' emotional reactions to teacher feedback over time due to various factors, including individual differences, previous experience and backgrounds (Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018). Hence, this study affirms students' positive emotions, which is an important factor that affects the way students engage respond to teacher feedback. On the other hand, teacher feedback may arouse learners' negative reactions such as disappointment, and as a result, it may inhibit their successful attempts to revise their texts (Han & Hyland, 2015). For instance, they were found to be frustrated over implicit or indirect feedback as opposed to direct feedback (Ferris, D., & Roberts, 2001). Moreover, students' reactions to teacher feedback involve their perceived self-confidence to revise their texts though a few learners seem less confident to do so even after receiving feedback due to their linguistic ability. Effective feedback should take into consideration students' abilities in order to assist them to develop their self-confidence (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Lee, 2008).

Having students to reflect on instructor's formulation of feedback allows construction of better understanding of students' preference for certain teacher feedback over others as part of their reactions to written feedback. In this study, while most students prefer feedback in the form of suggestions, a few of them show a preference for questions. In addition, this study demonstrates that all students prefer teacher's formulation of explicit feedback rather than implicit feedback due to the difficulty involved in understanding the intent of teacher implicated through indirect feedback. According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), teachers' indirect feedback appears counter-productive to

the clear intent that the teacher wants to convey to his/her students and might be misinterpreted or misunderstood by students based on their writing concerns. Our finding, however, disagrees with what was reported by Treglia (2009) about students' preference for indirect feedback for its role in minimizing teachers' hurting of students' feelings. The difference in students' preference for feedback in the two studies could be owing to the way feedback is composed by instructors. In other words, the instructor in this study, combined praises with other linguistic functions that are critical, which could mitigate his critical tone, and therefore, students did not feel any hurt caused by his directness.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study investigated an interesting issue regarding learners' processing and interacting to teacher feedback from students' perspectives. Although this research topic of engagement with teacher feedback has been explored in previous research, the current study looked at it from learners' commenting on the written feedback. Having learners comment on the feedback once received by them furthers our understanding of what and how learners engage with the feedback messages. Despite its interesting insight into how learners cognitively and affectively react to feedback, there are several limitations that need to be addressed for future research. The first limitation is that this study focused on pair work, and therefore, this might have affected the finding on students' processing of feedback. In other words, students could have minimized these challenges reported by them in their reflections and interviews while revising their writing through peer support. Therefore, future research may explore this issue from the perspective on individual students' processing of feedback. Another limitation is that this study is qualitative in nature and is based on reflections and interviews, which might not be sufficient to deeply explore how students process and interact to feedback. This suggests using oral reports and other data sources.

Finally, students' reactions to feedback were explored based on their reflections on their engagement with the instructor's feedback at the end of the study period through the follow-up interview rather than during the process. This should be done while students receive feedback by allowing them to respond to each feedback through written comment or even through written notes on what they feel upon receiving feedback. They can be also requested to record what they feel about the feedback received. By so doing, it will be possible to explore students' affective engagement with teacher feedback, which is defined as one dimension of learners' engagement that refers to how learners feel about the feedback and how they react to it (Han & Hyland, 2015; Hyland, 2003; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018).

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Appendix A: Reflection Questions

Write a short account as a reflection on your experience in receiving feedback on your written assignments. Include your answers to these questions:

1. What did you do with the feedback?
2. Did you understand all feedback?
3. Did you fail to understand some comments?
4. What did you do to understand these comments?

Appendix B: Follow-up interview Questions

1. What do you think of instructor written feedback provided on your essay?
2. Why do you think so?
3. Do you feel satisfied or unsatisfied about the feedback? Explain.
4. What did you feel after you read the feedback on your essay?
5. Did you feel that the feedback you received harsh and critical? Explain
6. What did you feel about your academic writing after receiving feedback and revising your essay?
7. Which type of feedback did you prefer to receive on your assignments? (e.g., questions, corrections, orders, explanations, suggestions, etc)? Why?
8. Did you like the feedback that hinted at your errors indirectly or feedback that directly explained the errors? Why so?

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