

Form-based Feedback Versus Content-based Feedback for EFL Learners' Academic Writing Development: Learners' Perspectives and Preferences

ردود الفعل القائمة على الشكل مقابل التعليقات المستندة إلى المحتوى لتطوير الكتابة الأكاديمية للمتعلمين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: وجهات نظر المتعلمين وتفضيلاتهم

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Abstract:

The motivation underlying the present study is the poor level in academic writing skill which is perceived as the lowest skilled matter among first-year EFL learners, and teacher feedback is no doubt a pivotal element in improving learners' writing proficiency. The aim is to report the use of form and content feedback for learners' academic written production. Data were collected using two different research instruments, learners' writing test and an interview. A writing test underwent three revisions and mirrored how learners responded to feedbacks given. Based on the findings, the researcher found that learners rely heavily on the form feedback than that of the content feedback. Also, teachers should include comments of encouragement to boost learners' motivation to improve their academic writing skills.

Keywords: academic writing skill; first-year learners; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); form feedback; content feedback

المخلص: تهدف الدراسة الحالية لتناول ضعف مستوي الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلبة السنة الأولى بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية وردود فعل وتعليقات الأساتذة تعتبر بلا شك عنصرا محوريا في تحسين كفاءتهم الكتابية. وذلك قصد تقرير مدى استخدام شكل وملاحظات المحتوى لتطوير الكفاءة الكتابية للطلبة. تم جمع البيانات باستخدام أدوات بحثية مختلفة كاختبار كتابة للطلبة وإجراء مقابلة معهم. خضع اختبار الكتابة لثلاث مراجعات وعكس كيفية استجابة الطلبة للتعليقات المقدمة. واستنادا إلى النتائج، توصل الباحث إلى أن الطلبة يعتمدون بشكل كبير على ردود الفعل المتعلقة بالشكل من ردود الفعل المحتوى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية؛ المتعلمين في السنة الأولى؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ شكل ردود الفعل؛ تعليقات المحتوى.

Introduction

In the field of teaching and learning the foreign language, some issues are vital from the learning process. One of them is improving learners' academic writing. As far as academic writing is the matter of debate, responding to learners' writing should be the focus. The reason is that responding on learners' writing is the way in which they can recognize their errors and then revise them.

Feedback is the most important aspect in teaching writing skill because it helps learners to improve, refine and shape their writing ability. Thus, it has a dual effect, improving learners' writing production and motivating them to write more and better. The feedback can be either form or content feedback. Therefore, teachers should be clear in providing feedback on their learners' writing where they can focus on the form or/and content to guide them to achieve better writing output. They should make the effort to spend time reading their learners' writing and give insightful comments to help them improve their revised drafts in which revision has been deemed a primary stage in the writing process.

The success in achieving coherent and effective writings is relying on the nature of the teacher's feedback. There are writing teachers who think that form feedback is effective in developing accuracy in writing. However, others believed that it is preferable to focus at content level issues such as cohesion, organization, and relevance rather than focusing on grammatical and lexical errors. The present study deals with form and content feedback for EFL learners' writing development.

1. Literature Review

Different writers stated the importance of feedback in enhancing learners' writing. Leki (1990a) points out that getting a well-written paper in second language considered as a problem for learners that consume their time and effort¹. She moreover stated that the least thing

¹- Leki, I. (1990a). *Coaching from the margins: Issues in written response*. In Barbara Kroll (Ed.), *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp 57-68).

that teachers can do towards students' writing is to react on their needs and improve their skill. Ferris (2003) gave a model concerning the role that feedback can play in developing students' writing ². She said that feedback has not only a short-term result but also a long-term one. The former occurs as immediate improvement in learners' piece of writing in subsequent drafts; the latter occurs as a development in learners' writings over time. Sommers (1982) states three main purposes for which teachers provide feedback on writing:³

- ✓ To inform writers as to whether their written products have conveyed their intended meanings
- ✓ To give the student writer a sense of audience (their interests and expectations) and make them ameliorate their writings accordingly.
- ✓ To offer learners an impetus for revision, for without comments from a critical reader, writers will feel no need to revise thoroughly if they ever think about revision.

However, for feedback to be effectual and fit the desired aims, Li Waishing (2000) presents four criteria he considers basic assumptions in feedback of any type⁴:

- ✓ Feedback must be integrated within the process of writing.
- ✓ It must be presented as an input and impetus for revision of writing.
- ✓ It must be formative (detailing the writer's strengths and weaknesses as well) , not summative (taking the form of grades, marks, or global comments such as good, bad, etc.)
- ✓ It must be appropriate: corresponding to the student-writer's background knowledge, level of learning, abilities, and so forth.

²- Ferris, D. (2003). *Responding to writing*. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Exploring the dynamics of second language writing* (pp. 119-140). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³- Sommers, N. (1982). *Responding to student writing*. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148-156. Retrieved October 20, 2009, from JSTOR database.

⁴- Li Waishing, J. (2000). *A process approach to feedback on writing*. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(2), 47-64. Retrieved from <http://WWW.isetl.Org/ijtthe/on26/04/2010>.

Through feedback, students are provided with information on aspects of their performance, through explanation, or proposition of better options.

Teachers' written comments deemed by Li Waishing (2000) as a common type used by teachers to correct their learners writing concerning form and content as well, thus according to him it is the most welcomed type that is preferred by learners⁵. Ferris (2003, p. 41) stated, "this type of feedback may represent the single biggest investment of time by instructors, and it is certainly clear that students highly value and appreciate it"⁶. In clearer words, teachers' written feedback is a time consuming and the feedback type that is appreciated by students.

In the same vain, Sommers (1982) considers written comments are a challenge for teachers⁷ as they direct them to revise and rewrite their work depending on feedback and making students discuss their teachers' remarks.

Teachers 'written feedback con focus on either form or content. There are teachers who think that form feedback is more appropriate in developing learners' writing accuracy. Ferris (2006) stated that teachers' feedback has proved that they focus more on form issues as grammar and mechanics⁸. Similarly, in a study conducted by (Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994), found that form feedback proved to have positive effects on long-term learners' development in accuracy and editing skills⁹. In the same vain, Chandler (2003) stated that form feedback

⁵Ibid

⁶Ferris, D. (2003). *Responding to writing*. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Exploring the dynamics of second language writing* (pp. 119-140). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷Sommers, N. (1982). *Responding to student writing*. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148-156. Retrieved October 20, 2009, from JSTOR database.

⁸Ferris, D. (2006). *Does error feedback help student writers? New evidence on the short- and long-term effects of writing error correction*. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.),

⁹Hedgcock, J., and Lefkowitz.N. (1994). *Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner receptivity to teacher response in L2 composing*. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3 (2), 63-141.

helps learners to find out their errors and fix them¹⁰. In another study held by Ashwell (2000) in which form and content feedback was the main concern, he found that changes of revision on learners' writing are emphasized the form feedback than the content feedback¹¹, which states that form feedback, is more effective than the content one.

However, others believed that it is preferable to focus at content level issues such as cohesion, organization, and relevance rather than focusing on grammatical and lexical errors. Content feedback helps to improve cohesion in paragraph writing and monitor the accuracy of learners' writing. For Nation(2009) teachers should give priority to their correction¹². In other words, teachers should correct content problems on early drafts and let the surface problems at the end. In the same respect, both Sommers (1982)¹³ and Zammel (1985)¹⁴ have the same idea of prioritizing feedback in which grammar errors should be corrected at the end because in the way learners rewrite their paper they may add, delete and reorganize their ideas so that these errors will be deleted. Therefore, correcting such kind of errors may cause hindrance for learners' focus on macro level meaning

Many studies stated the importance of focusing on form and content feedback, and their effectiveness when they adopt together (Biber, Nekrasova and Horn, 2011)¹⁵. Feedback that focuses on a

¹⁰ Chandler, J., (2003). *The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing*. Journal of Second Language Writing 12, 267–296

¹¹ Ashwell, T. (2000). *Patterns of Teacher Response to Students Writing in a Multiple-Draft Composition Classroom: Is Content Feedback Followed by Form feedback the best Method?* Journal of Second Language Writing. 227-253.

¹² Nation, I.S.P. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing*. London: Routledge

¹³ Sommers, N. (1982). *Responding to student writing*. College Composition and Communication, 33(2), 148-156. Retrieved October 20, 2009, from JSTOR database.

¹⁴ Zamel, V. (1985). *Responding to student writing*. TESOL Quarterly 19(1), 79-101. Retrieved October 24, 2009, from JSTOR database.

¹⁵ Biber, D., Nekrasova, T. and Horn, B. (2011). *The Effectiveness of Feedback for L1-English and L2-Writing Development: A Meta-Analysis*, ETS.

combination of form and content may result to a much greater development of grammatical accuracy than feedback that focuses exclusively on form.

The question of whether form feedback or content feedback or a combination of both is more effective and functional in improving learners' academic writing is the debate of many researchers. Although, both form and content feedbacks can be useful in developing learners' writing, the challenge is on how the learners respond to the feedbacks given to them by their English language-writing teachers. It is therefore the concern of the present study to investigate how learners respond to both form and content feedbacks from the first draft to the third one and thus report their attitudes and experiences in dealing with both feedbacks.

2. Background of the study

The present section discusses and provides a general background to the three key concepts around which the present article revolves: writing skills, form and content feedback.

2.1 Writing skill: The definition of the term "writing" as a concept, as an act and as a skill has changed in relation to the changes writing has known. Different definitions describe writing from a distinct perspective; they vary from broad assumptions to narrow descriptions.

When taking into consideration all the definitions, we end up saying that writing skill has not one single definition. The following statement can be considered as a general definition that is valid in any situation: writing is "an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose, and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience" (Weigle 2002, p. 19)¹⁶. This means that writing is a means of communication per se in which writers go through such a complex process to achieve a number of purposes.

2.2. Written feedback: It is the most common way of responding on learners' paper; it takes the form of hand written commentary on

¹⁶ Weigle, S. C. (2002). *Assessing writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

learners' compositions. Commentary feedback is deemed as commenting on learners' writings rather than evaluating their writing. Hyland (2003, p. 180) stated, "If time allows, responses may take the form of both marginal and end comments. A comprehensive end note allows more space and opportunities for the teacher to summarize and prioritize key points and to make general observations on the paper"¹⁷. I.e. when time permits, teachers can provide students with both marginal and end comments to boost their feedback. A useful feedback helps students to avoid mistakes in their final version. It can be either form feedback focuses on form issues as grammar and mechanics, or content feedback focuses on cohesion, organization, and relevance.

3. Research foundation

3.1 Problem of the Study

Casual observation of learners' papers showed that most of them face problems in their writing: from grammar and mechanics to cohesion and organization. Moreover, they tend to overlook and ignore the teacher's feedback on their writing. Teachers make great efforts and spend a long-time crossing, underlying, and correcting errors, reordering ideas, and providing suggestions for improving learners' writing. Yet surprisingly, the learners do not consider their feedback.

In fact, learners do not always respond to the teachers' feedback, and between form feedback and content feedback, they feel lazy and careless to correct all of error types. It is therefore the focus of the present paper to examine the written English of those learners as they lack writing perfectly. More emphasis is given on how they respond to the feedbacks provided and how such feedbacks develop their writing production.

3.2 Aims of the Study

¹⁷ Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The present study aims at achieving a number of purposes; first, it seeks to examine learners' attitudes towards form and content feedbacks in developing their quality of writing. Second, it looks for discovering the effect of teachers' form and content feedbacks on learners' writing development. Thirdly, it aims at finding out if there are any remarkable differences in learners' drafts in writing because of teachers' form and content feedbacks on their writing production. It is therefore the main issue of the present study is to enhance the teaching of writing and develop the writing skills of EFL learners.

3.3 Research questions/ Hypothesis

In attempting to investigate the effectiveness of teachers' form and content feedback on learners' academic writing development and their attitudes, it is necessary to answer the following questions:

1. How do learners discern teachers' form based and content-based feedbacks?
2. What types of written feedback do learners prefer from their teachers?

Based on the assumption that teachers' form-based feedback is highly preferred by learners in their revision stages, we hypothesis that if teachers provide form and content feedback on learners' academic writing, their tendency will be toward form feedback than that of the content feedback.

4. Methodology and Research design

4.1. Research Instrument

To meet the research aforementioned purposes, two distinct research instruments will be used: a writing test for learners and learners' interview. The writing test is meant to examine the usefulness of providing form and content written feedback before final piece of writing and how learners respond to these feedbacks. The learners' interview is meant to find out learners' attitudes and experience in revising the paper from the first draft to the third or final one. The

interview was used to support the findings in the written tasks of learners.

4.2. Participants

Because the researcher could not work with the whole population, the sample was from a large population. First-year LMD students at the Department of English language at Batna2 University are fifteen groups of about 59 students each. One group were taken at random with no specific criteria, and the choice of this group was also random since the administration chooses which groups a given teacher would teach. The total number of learners tested is twenty-seven (27). However, this number has been reduced to nineteen (19) responses. The rest (8 papers) were disregarded for one main reason: they did not finish the second revision stage of writing process.

4.3. Data Collection and Procedure

The data for the present study was obtained from two different research sources: (1) written test/drafts and (2) interviews with the learners. These two sources are essential in the present study as they provided detailed information on their tendency, attitudes and preferences of each type of feedback.

4.3.1. Written Test / Drafts

All the participants (19 learners) were asked to write in-class argumentative essay in 90-minute time on "Can learners study better using digital textbooks than they can by using books, pens, and paper? All the learners went through three revisions such as first draft, second draft, and third draft. Each revision was done after giving the form and content feedbacks to get information on how learners responded to the feedbacks given. The revisions were classified, analyzed and compared whether learners depend on form feedback or content feedback in the first, second, and third drafts.

The study was conducted in three sessions for the month of November 2016. The first session was writing the first draft. Learners' papers were checked using the form and content feedback then the

number of errors was counted and the average number of errors was calculated. The same steps were followed in the second and third draft. In each draft, the number of errors was counted and the average number of errors and the percentage error reduction were calculated to decide if there were changes and improvements in the revised essays.

To maintain the validity of the feedback given, there were three other teachers who checked the corrected essays in each stage. The first teacher from Batna 2 University, The second teacher from Jijel University, and the third teacher from Oum Elbouagi University.

4.3.2. Interviews

The interview took place in the class after the writing tasks. Each interview lasted between 05 to 10 minutes. During the interviews, the learners were asked about their attitudes, preferences, and experiences in revising their papers. The interviews were used as a help in the writing process of the learners. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim for analytical purposes.

4.4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The aim of the written test and interviews is to see whether form and content feedbacks that teachers provide before final drafts were taken into consideration by the learners or not. Thus, learners' consideration of such feedback is directed in the present study, by the number of times the comments occur in first, second and final drafts. Form and content feedbacks integration in the present study is determined by the proportion of comments on final piece of writing compared to first and second one. However, the comparison of the learners' first, second and third piece of writing detected some interesting observations that are worth mentioning.

The written comments that the learners received on their first, second, and third drafts addressed both surface and meaning-level aspects of writing. I.e. Form and content feedbacks. Under the first class are involved the teachers' comments on learners' errors in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Feedback in the other class included meaning-level issues such as good/poor content, organization

of ideas, cohesion, and coherence. Both form and content feedbacks are further detailed in the following table.

Table 1: Classification of Teacher's Written Comments

| Comment types | Sub types | Description of the type |
|-----------------------|----------------|--|
| Form-based feedback | Grammar errors | Subject-verb agreement, Sentence elements, The use of quantifiers, plural formation, Parts of speech formation. Verb tenses, Run on sentences |
| | Vocabulary | Word choice, missing words, Parallelism , Wordiness |
| | Mechanics | Punctuation and capitalization. |
| Contentbased feedback | Content | Poor argumentation and organization Lack of supporting sentences and examples Lack of coherent and relevant sentences |

During the period of correcting learners' paper, the results of the present study showed that they responded more to the form feedback than that of the content feedback in their essays. It is clear that all of the learners proved to go through the same thorny path towards the production of their first drafts. They all responded extremely to the form feedback in their draft. The aforementioned observations are clarified using extracts from the participants' first, second and third piece of writing, and the percentage of error reduction are presented in tables.

4.4.1. Form Feedback in First Drafts through Third Drafts

Table two states the number of errors made by the learners concerning form-based feedback starting from the first draft up to the third draft. Statistically speaking, in the total of first drafts of the learners' essays, there was a total of 702 errors. On average, there were 36.94 errors per essay, 418 errors for the second draft. On average, there were 22 errors per essay. However, there were 219 errors for the third draft. On average, there were 11.52 errors per essay. The proportion of the errors in the learners' first, second and third attempt writing is shown in the table below.

The results furthermore showed that the statistics changed through the three drafts. The total number of errors in the final drafts reduced to 219. On average, there were 11.52 errors per essay. As the researcher hypothesized it, the learners in their subsequent drafts took a considerable proportion of the teachers' form feedback that had been received on first drafts into account.

Overall, there was a significant improvement and a noticeable development in learners' writing. Most of them showed progress in their essays as they revealed better control of punctuation and capitalization, verb tense, and run on sentences, and they did fewer errors on the use of article and quantifiers. Furthermore, in writing the final essay, the learners tended to integrate their teachers' suggestions concerning their vocabulary.

The aforementioned observations are illustrated counting the number of errors from the learners' first and subsequent drafts in the following table.

Table 2: Proportion of Errors in learners' Drafts in Form Based Feedback

| Serial | Number of errors in first draft | Number of errors in second draft | Number of errors in third draft |
|---------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| 1 | 48 | 19 | 11 |
| 2 | 25 | 20 | 13 |
| 3 | 23 | 14 | 10 |
| 4 | 39 | 26 | 15 |
| 5 | 49 | 30 | 12 |
| 6 | 52 | 28 | 15 |
| 7 | 31 | 21 | 14 |
| 8 | 38 | 26 | 8 |
| 9 | 27 | 18 | 15 |
| 10 | 35 | 30 | 14 |
| 11 | 27 | 11 | 8 |
| 12 | 47 | 33 | 11 |
| 13 | 39 | 22 | 5 |
| 14 | 59 | 26 | 12 |
| 15 | 10 | 5 | 2 |
| 16 | 17 | 14 | 10 |
| 17 | 46 | 15 | 7 |
| 18 | 41 | 32 | 12 |
| 19 | 49 | 28 | 10 |
| average | 702/ 36.94 | 418/ 22 | 219/ 11.52 |

Although the teachers' form feedback provided to the learners was useful and helpful in their essay revision, it does not necessary help them to produce an effective and coherent essay.

4.4.2. Content Feedback in First Drafts through Third Drafts

| Serial | Number of errors in first draft | Number of errors in second draft | Number of errors in third draft |
|---------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| 2 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| 4 | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| 5 | 8 | 3 | 1 |
| 6 | 5 | 4 | 2 |
| 7 | 6 | 5 | 3 |
| 8 | 8 | 5 | 3 |
| 9 | 9 | 7 | 4 |
| 10 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 11 | 9 | 7 | 4 |
| 12 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 13 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| 14 | 8 | 5 | 2 |
| 15 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 16 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| 17 | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| 18 | 9 | 5 | 3 |
| 19 | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| average | 122/ 6.42 | 114/ 6 | 46/ 2.42 |

Table 3 shows the number of errors made by the learners regarding content-based feedback in the three drafts. Statistically speaking, there was 122 errors in the first draft. On average, there were 6,42 errors per essay. 114 errors for the second draft, an average of 6, and for the third draft, 46 errors an average of 2, 42. The proportion of the errors in the learners' first, second and third attempt writing is shown in the table below.

Table 3: Proportion of Errors in learners' Drafts in Content Based Feedback

There was an acceptable response of learners in the content feedback provided by their teachers so that a kind of development in their essays. In a comparison with their response in form feedback, there is a tendency for them to focus on form feedback rather than the content feedback.

4.4.3. Learners' interviews

Based on the interviews held, the learners' attitudes and preferences on feedback are closely related to form feedback. According to them, the reason is that form comments are clear, easy, and direct. This means that they have the perception and attitude that producing good essays is a question of correcting only the grammatical errors than the content and this has been approved by their writings.

Content feedback seems a hard task for learners, and they complain that they received a lot of content comments. Furthermore, they think that they are getting content feedback on every sentence they wrote. This reveals that learners have a strong preference to receive a form feedback than a content feedback.

The resulted proved a strong relation between the variables of the present study, namely, teachers' form and content feedback provided prior to final drafts and the learners' writing production. This type of feedback has a twofold effect: improving learners' revision skills and developing their writing quality while taking various drafts for the same essay.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, form-based and content-based feedback proved to be as an effective way in teaching and learning academic writing skills for learners of English language at Batna 2 University. Learners showed an improvement in their academic writing skills as they respond to both feedbacks in their revision stages.

Between teachers' form feedback and content feedback, learners showed a high tendency and preference to form feedback during their revision stages. The current study adds to previous research in investigating some of the features that distinguish teachers' form and content feedback from other feedbacks. These are: (1) a greater learners' acceptance for the idea; (2) higher level in learners' writing development; (3) learners' high response and preferences in teachers' form feedback than content feedback; (4) more student-initiated interaction in teachers' form feedback.

Recommendations of the study

Based on the findings of the study, the following points are proposed and recommended to all members of the teaching learning process:

- Teachers should provide their learners with the way they are going to assess their academic writing.
- Teachers should consider the importance of using both form and content feedbacks in facilitating learners' revision stages on their essays. Therefore, decision makers should arrange talks and workshops on providing feedback to learners.
- Teachers should be clear and accurate in giving their feedbacks to the learners' writing, for the learners might misinterpret their comments. "say enough for students to understand what you mean"(Lunsford, 1997, p.103)¹⁸
- Teachers should reward their learners by showing the progress in their writing to their classmates.

¹⁸ Lunsford, R.F. (1997). *When less is more: Principles for responding in disciplines*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 69, 91-104.

- Learners should appreciate and respond to both feedback (form and content feedback)

Limitations of the study

The present study is limited in two noteworthy ways. Firstly, it was focused only on written feedback on EFL learners' academic writing. Secondly, the present study did not take into account teachers' attitudes and perspectives regarding form and content feedback.

Suggestions for Further Research

As any study, different issues for further research have been suggested as developing activities for teaching academic writing through form and content feedback as writing research papers, curriculum vitae...etc. In addition, investigating the effect of using other different types of feedback as oral, electronic.....etc. on improving learners' academic writing.

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