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## **Recorded Oral Feedback in the EFL Writing Classrooms**

### **Abstract**

*Feedback in general and especially in writing courses is paramount for student learning but it has to adhere to certain principles to be effective. Written feedback has been the norm but in an effort to encourage more interaction and increase motivation, other forms of delivering feedback are being explored across classrooms. This study looks into the effects of recorded oral feedback on student success and motivation. Results reveal that despite the lack of correlation between this method and student performance in writing tasks, it is viewed as useful and practical and it is preferred in future tasks by students.*

**Keywords:** Recorded feedback, EFL writing, motivation

## 1- Introduction

Every semester in our classrooms we strive to assess students through projects, reports and papers to foster learner independence and deep learning. Unfortunately, many times though meant to be formative and low-stake assessments, they become highly summative, often stressful and with no wash back effects for students. One element that can transform this experience is feedback. Effective feedback points out the strengths and lays out a map for improvement. It helps students revise, review and self-edit, and provides us teachers with an alley to promote subject matter learning and develop writing skills. Research has shown that effective feedback is one of the most important factors in writing improvement. However this is not always easy because it is time consuming. Written feedback has been the norm in many university assignments, projects and essays as well as in the second language writing. Nonetheless, nowadays educators are looking for new methods and tools to increase student motivation and involvement in the learning process. With the availability of so many technological tools, recorded oral feedback is being widely used across classrooms including the EFL writing classroom. It is a necessary undertaking for instructors at all levels to explore means which aim at maximizing the learning experience (Harper, 2009) and recorded oral feedback may be worth exploring. This study will look into the benefits and the effects of recorded oral feedback in student writing and the extent to which it promotes learning and motivation.

## 2-Feedback in EFL writing courses

Writing courses are important for both students and faculty since writing clearly and effectively is one common objective of many courses in the academic journey. EFL writing has multiplied its importance in the recent years due to the fluid borders and unified ways of communication. Many universities, English medium or not, recognize its importance and strive to equip students with viable English writing skills to function in today's world. The shift from product oriented to process oriented has positioned feedback at the centre of the writing process but problems are perceived from both students and professors. It is reported that in first language writing, students do not read and incorporate comments in their work (Duncan 2007). On the other hand, students complain about the quality and the usefulness of the

feedback. The research literature in second/foreign language writing has not been completely positive about its role in writing development (Hyland K., & Hyland F., 2006). Issues such as form focus / error correction are still at the center of the debate with many educators left contemplating about the best way to deliver feedback. Researchers agree that tending to content should take place before the language errors, if at all. However, Leki (1990) states that some students may be less interested in comments on content, feeling that they have little impact on the quality of their writing (Bull, 2000). This might be the result of students believing their grammar is not good, hence expecting feedback mainly in that aspect. Students report that they value feedback and this is supported by the findings that most feedback-linked revisions seem to result in text improvements (Hyland 2003). Hyland also found that students often revised their texts with no real understanding as to why they were doing it and instead of rephrasing they preferred to delete the unclear parts. In this case, although the teacher receives an improved text, that doesn't necessarily, translate to improving writing skills. To be effective, feedback needs to be inclusive, instructional, clear, specific, timely and linked to the teaching goals and assessment criteria (Spiller, 2009). It need not be lengthy or complex but it should contain suggestions and means to allow the students to self-manage their learning (Harper, 2009). This type of feedback falls into the socio-constructivist paradigm where feedback is not seen as a one way transfer but as a facilitative environment with plenty of room for autonomy and shared experiences (Evans, 2013). The role of feedback as a provider of a roadmap or a plan for improvement is also captured by some new terms in the literature: feed-forward and feed-up. Feedback is especially important in the early stages / early weeks so that derailing can be avoided and students can achieve their learning outcomes at the desired level.

### **3-Recorded oral feedback**

Oral feedback in writing classes takes place in writing conferences where negotiation and interaction can help students benefit from the feedback. However it has been pointed out that due to some cultural and social issues, some L2 learners do not engage as desired with the authority figures such as teachers, thus failing to incorporate teachers' comments into their work (Goldstein & Conrad 1990 cited by Hyland K., & Hyland F., 2006). Moreover in large classes, individu-

al conferencing may not be feasible due to time constraints. Alternatively, recorded oral feedback may be more feasible than individual conferences and more interactive than the written comments. Hyland (2003) notes:

“This not only saves time and adds novelty; it provides listening practice for learners and assists those with an auditory learning style preference. It also shows the writer how someone responds to their writing as it develops, where ideas get across, where confusion arises, where logic or structure breaks down”

Literature has been inconclusive about its effect compared to written comments in improving writing skills, but research has shown its positive perception on students. Ice. P. et al. (2007) in an online course found that audio feedback was perceived to be more effective than written feedback, was associated with increased retention of content, and gave the perception that the instructor cared more about the student. Harper (2009) reported that students in an introductory psychology course who received digitized oral feedback expressed higher perceptions of competence, intrinsic motivation, and autonomy than those who received more conventional written feedback. A study of graphic design students reported that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and this way of delivering feedback supports the learning preferences of this m-learning generation (McCormack & Taylor 2006). Gartner (2004) in an exploratory study of EAP tutors' taped oral feedback concluded that the shift from written to taped oral feedback contains extensive comments both in praise and judgment that engage more with the writer, have a more formative purpose, and are more explicit. Evans (2013) conducted a review of over 100 studies done in the field of e-assessment and concluded that its impact on student performance was found to be highly variable.

#### **4-Context and Rationale of the Study**

This study aimed at contributing to the field of feedback in EFL writing classroom by investigating the effects of recorder oral feedback on student performance and motivation. It was carried out in a writing class in a Middle Eastern University where great importance is given to English writing skills. Students struggle with writing classes, mak-

ing them the infamous courses where the failing rates are higher than other English courses. In the writing class, students write two drafts and one final essay for the different genres stated in the syllabus. Teaching the same writing course for a couple of semesters, the author observed that particularly when writing their second drafts, students focus mostly on language mistakes (micro errors) and forget to attend to content issues (macro errors). Ignoring the feedback on content and organization in their first drafts has two negative effects. First, it results in poor grades and in students not completely meeting the learning outcomes. Second, students need to make drastic changes to the content when writing their final (third) drafts which in return makes language editing up to that stage worthless as they may have to rewrite big chunks of their essays. Despite the individual conferences with students about how to improve their first drafts, it was clear that most of the remarks were quickly forgotten and most of the content feedback ignored. Furthermore Abdulkhaleq et.al., (2013) study indicated that oral feedback in face-to-face conferencing was of limited use to postgraduate Yemeni EFL students in helping them revise their thesis drafts. In these circumstances, I introduced recorded oral feedback with two main purposes in mind:

1. to improve writing skills measured by their performance in the second drafts
2. to increase motivation to interact with the teacher and the material measured by self-reported perceptions

## 5-Method and Procedures

Participants were female students in a writing class studying mainly science majors (n=23). The class had received traditional written comments along with error codes for the multiple drafts of the first genre in their syllabus (5 weeks). The class was randomly divided into two groups of 11 and 12 students: a treatment group and a control group. All the students were asked to write an essay on a given topic. The treatment group received a recorded audio with feedback about the content and organization along with feedback for their language errors whereas the control group received the usual written feedback on both content and language. Screencast o'matic was chosen to deliver the recorded feedback as it can record comments along with

screen shots. The feedback was sent to the students who could listen/ watch it before or while writing their second drafts. The students were priorly instructed on how to access the electronically delivered feedback. For the purpose of this change, the second drafts were evaluated for improvement, task fulfilment, content, and organization. The language errors were counted in all cases. Both written and recorded feedback was analysed and coded for instances or praise and positive judgement in alignment with the literature. Finally, the treatment group was asked to complete a questionnaire where they self-reported their perceptions about the way of delivering feedback

## **6-Results and Discussion**

Once the second drafts were marked, data was used to see if there is a correlation between the type of feedback and student performance. Students were evaluated for content and language separately. For content, the mean of the oral feedback group (8.250) was slightly higher than the mean of the written feedback group (7.774), but after running independent sample t-tests, statistical significance could not be established. Regarding language errors the means for both groups were 13.3 and 11.7 respectively indicating that written feedback was more effective for micro errors. Nevertheless, students' comments about this new way of feedback were mostly positive. They found it exciting and appreciated the fact that they could listen to the comments while re-writing their essay. 7 of 11 students indicated that they were satisfied and 3 of 11 were extremely satisfied with recorded oral feedback (ROF). 10 of 11 would like to get this type of feedback in the future. Only one student provided negative comments regarding the audio feedback. She found it difficult to understand and said she would prefer written feedback. When analysed for instances of praise and positive judgement, there were about 32 instances of praise in the ROF compared to 18 in the written feedback. Some samples of student responses to open ended questions are below:

Q. What did you like about recorded teacher comments?

S.3 More comments, better. I can listen to it many times.

S.4 I like hearing my teacher.

S.9 I can listen to it anywhere.

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Q. How did the recorded comments help you improve your essay?

S.3 I listened to it many times. I added supporting details and examples like my teacher said.

S.11 I removed one reason because my teacher didn't like it. Also I corrected many grammar mistakes.

The findings are consistent with the literature that this way of delivering feedback may be appropriate for this generation and might be effective for content feedback. Students appreciate the care and the human dimension to it. The fact that no correlation could be established between ROF and achievement indicated that as we go forward, a variety of feedback is needed for best results. Written, oral face-to-face, and oral recorded feedback are all beneficial and should be used thoughtfully.

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